

The

BLACK HOUSE

Roy Bridges



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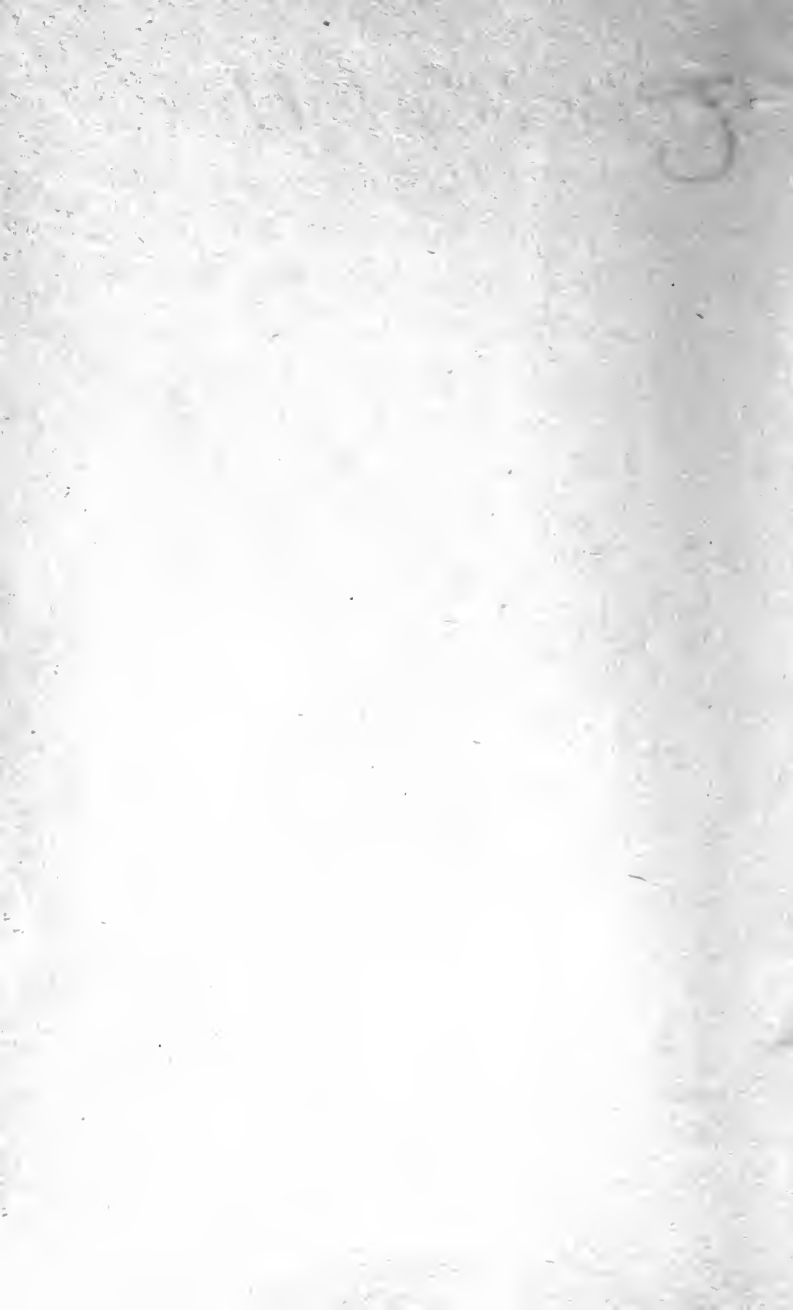
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The Black House



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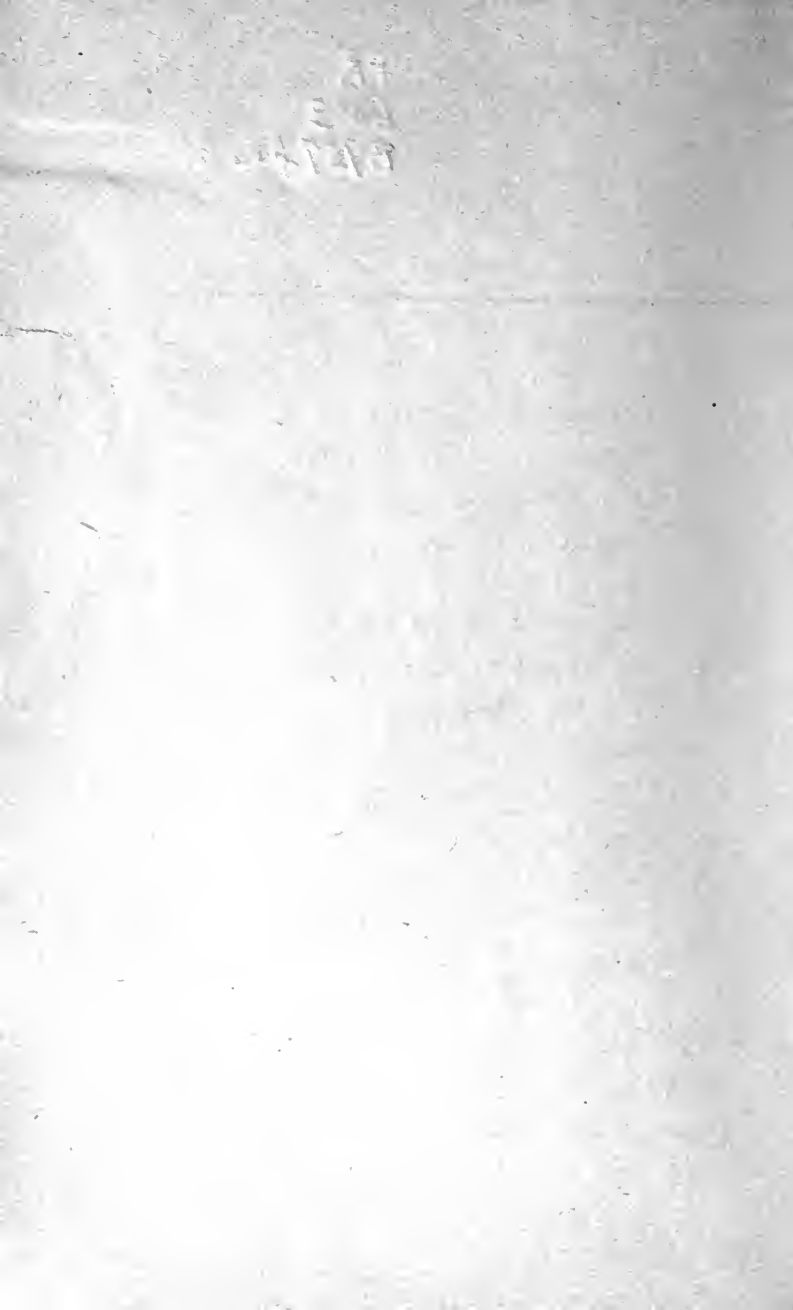
By ROY BRIDGES, Author of 'The Immortal Dawn,' 'Merchandise,' 'The Bubble Moon,' 'The Fugitive,' etc.   

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To
L. V. BIGGS, Esq.
WITH ALL
GOOD WISHES

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MY enrolment as a scholar in the Black House—Mr. Simon Gandy's establishment for the sons of gentlemen—resulted from the hostility of a soured spinster, Miss Lavinia Pounds, towards myself. Her brother, Josiah Pounds, was my guardian, drawing a fat remuneration for the duty—though I had no knowledge of it at the time—but neither feeling nor indeed affecting any particular love for me. Certainly he flogged me on occasion with the severity of a Spartan parent; otherwise I led a dull and neglected life in his house Holborn way. So dull a life—without companions of my own choice and years—that I thought it a fortunate event, that for a piece of insolence to Lavinia, who presided over Josiah's home, I was not flogged, gaoled in the coal-cellar, and finally reduced to penitence on a week's dieting of bread and water, but sentenced by Mr. Pounds on his return home—he had a pretty practice at Old Bailey, and saved many a rogue from the rope—to be put to school.

Mark me now—a youngster turned thirteen years—ranged by Miss Lavinia as prose-

cutor and Bow Street officer in one, before my guardian. He was standing before the fire in his study—the tails of his bottle-green coat raised to warm his plump body—a middle-sized fellow, precise in his dress, his frilled shirt starched to a snowy whiteness, his pantaloons cut tightly to his legs, and his waistcoat well lined. His cunning little blue eyes pierced me through the spectacles upon his snub red-nose. Ruddy he was, but his nose was redder, with the perennial blush on it from port wine, of which he had a nice appreciation; his lips were finely but cruelly cut; his brow heavy, and bald from sweating under his wig in court. Miss Lavinia was lean, and rustily clad in a gown with the brown tinge on it of a starveling black cat's fur—her person and her dress contrasting with Josiah's rotundity and smart attire.

'Well, my lad,' said my guardian, rapping me upon the skull with his snuff-box, as Miss Lavinia propelled me forward, 'Well!—Told my sister to go to the devil—hey? You did—hey? And what have you to say for yourself?'

'Brother, if you're going to flog him, I'll retire,' said Miss Lavinia delicately. 'I wax-ended the cane for you, and it's on the table there. He deserves to smart for his impudence.'

'Flogging! Oh, my dear Lavinia, I'm tired of flogging the cub!'

'Never did the young varmint deserve it more.'

‘Told you to go to the devil, did he?’ grinning.

‘He did!’ snapped she. ‘And he meant it.’

‘Aye, aye, and no doubt! He meant every word of it. Maybe, Lavinia, he’ll have his wish.’

‘Brother,’ cried she, ‘you blaspheme!’

‘Do I, Lavinia?’ laughing at her. ‘No, no, I don’t blaspheme. You wrong me. Come! Be just, Lavinia.’

‘Is the varmint then to go scot free?’ cried she, her eyes snapping sparks.

‘That should appeal to me,’ he answered, chuckling. (I saw that he had drunk more wine than he could carry soberly.) ‘I’ve saved so many rogues from dancing in the air, and so many rogues’ backs from running red, why should I flog this rogue?’ }

‘Brother, I tell you, the brat’s insolence is past bearing.’

‘Aye, aye, and no doubt. He needs a firmer hand over him than mine, Lavinia,’—smiling foolishly at his fat left hand. He had a ring with a green stone on his forefinger. ‘A firmer hand—and a birch instead of a cane.’

She nodded her head in venomous accord. ‘Yes, a birch,’ cried she. ‘A birch plied till he squeals for mercy.’

‘My dear Lavinia,’ said my guardian, making her a little bow, ‘I’m happy to agree with you. Hey, you dog’—with so savage a snarl of his red lips and flash of his blue eyes that for the life of me I could not save myself from starting back—‘you need a firm hand. D’ye hear

me—a firm hand over you? Hey?’ tweaking my ear.

‘I hear,’ I muttered, as he lugged me towards him.

‘Oh, you hear! Mylad, you’ll feel, I promise you. You recall Sim Gandy, Lavinia?’

She cast him a furtive look and her lips tightened. She said in a low voice, ‘I recall your speaking of him, Josiah.’

‘Well, he’s set up a school for sons of gentlemen—for sons of gentlemen—he—he—he!’

I marked her watching him, while he leered at her.

‘A clever dog! Oh, a clever dog!’

‘Josiah!’ she snapped at him sharply, noting his condition; whereat, as if recollecting himself, he released my ear; snapped his snuff-box lid and went on more soberly, ‘Oh, aye—clever! A scholar, you rogue. A Master of Arts, Oxford. A disciplinarian. One who will fill your empty pate with learning. One who will flay your hide, if you transgress.’

‘Where’s his school, brother?’ asked she.

‘Far enough away from here,’ he answered testily. ‘On the coast. Console yourself, my dear Lavinia. This dog shall trouble you no more.’

‘Trouble!’ said she, bitter for the thought that I should escape immediate punishment. ‘Trouble! How soon’s the scamp to be packed off? At once? Or is he to be about this house for days worriting me, and knowing that whatever he may say or do, you’ll not flog him? I’ll flog him myself—I will!’

He waved his snuff-box at her impatiently. 'He'll be here maybe a week, maybe longer,' he said. 'He'll go, when it's convenient to me to leave Town, and no sooner.'

'A week! The rogue's to be here another week!'

'Or more,' he answered, yawning.

'For a week or more I'm to have him here, and put up with his insolence! A week or more he's to go scot-free! Brother, do you mind me? He told me——'

'He consigned you to the devil!' he took her up savagely, his face suffused. 'Gad, Lavinia, I warrant the devil wants you more—far more—than I at this moment. Go away, Lavinia, I am weary to death.'

'You'll not flog him!'

'I've told you, no!'

'So he's to go scot-free!'

'He's to be packed off to Sim Gandy. I promise you, Lavinia, Gandy's right arm has a vigour that mine lacks. Now that's enough. Go away, woman! Is my house my house? Am I to be plagued to death with you? Deuce take you!'

Before the wrath shown by his snarling lips, the blaze of his little eyes, and the flush of his face like the flush of heavy port, she quailed; struck at my skull with her bunch of keys, and missing, whisked from the room. My guardian chuckled with appreciation, and a while he stood before the fire regarding me, as sheepishly I faced him. He shot out his right hand suddenly—he had an odd strength in those

fat white hands of his—and he pulled me forward by my collar.

‘Gad, young James,’ he said, chuckling, ‘you promise well. I’ve yet a mind to flog you soundly. Not for Lavinia’s sake—for your own. What have you to say for yourself?’—shaking me like a rat. ‘You’re an insolent rogue, James. Gandy will cut the insolence out of your hide, I promise you. He’s a martinet, my lad. A fellow who’s sailed the world up and down. Learnt the discipline of a ship of the Line. A bold fellow, a ripe scholar, a seaman known from Barbadoes to Bombay. An odd compound—hey, James? Seaman and scholar! How d’ye welcome the prospect, James?’

I hated his grinning face and cruel lips and cunning little eyes. I muttered savagely, ‘Oh, it’ll suit me well enough.’

‘You think so!’ He took me up with spluttering laughter. ‘You mean you’ll be glad to be quit of us. Come, James, come—is this gratitude? Have I taken a serpent to my bosom? Now is this kind, James?’

I answered to his mockery, ‘You’ve treated me like a dog. I’ll be glad to be away from you.’

‘From me, James!’

‘From you and your sister. Most from you! Though I’ve cause to hate you both.’

‘So you bite the hand that’s fed you! Why, here’s a scholar after Sim Gandy’s heart and hand! James, I can promise you his very tender care. He’ll succeed, where I’ve failed.

Sim will be a father to you!’ His fingers tightened viciously on my neck.

‘Who was my father?’ gasped I, nigh choking in his grip. ‘Why am I here living with you? Why haven’t I father and mother like other lads? Are they both dead?’

His hand relaxed from my collar. He leaned back against the chimney-piece eyeing me cunningly and intently. ‘Both dead!’ he asserted smoothly. ‘Dead and buried. Resting in hope of a joyful resurrection.’ And suddenly shooting his head forward and his lips snarling, ‘Why d’ye ask me this, James?’

I answered nothing. I felt a lump in my throat, and my eyes saw him through a mist.

‘Come,’ he snapped. ‘Why d’ye ask me? Now, I mean? What’s put it into your head? Haven’t I told you often both are dead? Who’s been——’ breaking off to take snuff, but his fingers spilling the scented dust on to his frill.

I wondered at his concern and the shaking of his hand. Standing there, with his head poked forward, his fingers dipping into the box and still spilling the snuff. Gaping at him, I said nothing.

‘What’s put this into your head?’ he demanded again. ‘Why don’t you answer?’

‘Put what into my head?’ I stammered.

‘Don’t give me my questions back! Rot you, sir,’ with blazing bullying wrath, as if he sought to cow a witness in the court—‘Don’t try to cross-examine me! What made you ask?’

'I want to know. That's all.'

'Oh, that's all! Oh, yes, I'll warrant me that's all! Have you been about the house all day or abroad?'

'I've been here all day. I'm always here.' And indeed I was never abroad save in Miss Lavinia's or her brother's custody.

'Then what's put the question into that head of yours?'

'I've told you. Nothing—except wondering.'

He seemed to master himself by an effort. He snapped the snuff-box and pointed his fat forefinger at me. 'You want to know?' said he. 'You really want to know? I wouldn't ask, my lad, if I were you. I would not ask! I warn you—don't say I haven't warned you!'

'I want to know!' I said again heavily.

He gave me a swift cunning look. He answered. 'Your father was a rogue, James—a rogue who left you nothing but his sins. Your mother—well, she's dead. I've brought you up, James; call it a whim; call it charity; call it what you will. At least I've saved you from a foundling hospital or a charity school. You're not a grateful cub, James. You're not! Some day you'll have your history. You won't be proud of it. For the time, let it rest—with the dead! Let it rest! Get to bed, boy.'

But though I sped from the room to tumble upstairs into my attic, and hot with rage and shame to blubber on my pillow till it was wet,

I took with me the picture of his flushed and scowling face, his peering and suspicious eyes and his shaking hand spilling the snuff upon his frill. He was so far in his cups, that the composure and control, which else would have defeated any questions of mine, had failed him for the time—the manner of his speech gave me to understand that he had lied to me, and that my parentage and the years I had passed in his house spelt a mystery which I should set myself to solve.

MY guardian had said a week or more must elapse before he conducted me down to the coast to the establishment of Mr. Simon Gandy. Eight days thence—it was a Thursday morning—we drove together down from London to the Black House, wherein Mr. Gandy conducted his school for the sons of gentlemen. We had left London before daylight ; we had travelled all that day and the night through in a covered carriage—as if my guardian had an objection to the mail coach—and we had paused thrice on our journey for the change of horses and for our refreshment at the inn. I had slumbered uneasily after the night fell, but if I woke, as we jolted over the rough roads, and peered through the carriage window I could make out only the shadows of dark banks by the wayside, of hedges, and of clumps of trees going black to a black sky, with the wan moon shining at a chance break in the clouds. In the darkness we clattered over the cobbles into the main street of Corbe, and the rattle waking me, when our carriage was pulling up in the stable yard of an inn, I was prepared to step down, stiff

and gaping and shivering, with my guardian. I felt upon my lips the salt blown up by the sea wind; I heard at hand the wash of waters. I believed that through the dark I could make out great cliffs going high above the village. My guardian, wrapped in a thick greatcoat, muffled about the throat with shawls, his hat thrust down to his ears, bade me crossly follow him; and leaving grumbling driver and groom to tend the horses, he led me to the door of the inn, whence a flicker of light and the clatter of shoes told that some one was not abed. As my guardian pushed open the door of the kitchen, the rush of light blinded me. But presently I marked a huge figure lurch up from the fire, and I heard a gruff voice demand, 'Who's that? What the——? Come down from London, sir?'

To which my guardian answered, 'Yes, from London. We need a good meal and a warm bed at once. You're the landlord, I take it.'

'Aye, the landlord for sure! Bed and a meal for sure! And a drop of brandy hot—French brandy—none the worse——' breaking off suddenly.

'None the worse, you would have said, my friend,' my guardian took him up, 'for never having paid duty.'

'Who says so?' growled the fellow suspiciously.

'You would have said so,' my guardian answered, laughing. 'Have no fear, my friend. Excise, or no excise—it matters not a jot to me, if only your brandy be good, and hot.'

By now I had rubbed my eyes clear. I made out that we were in a vast kitchen, furnished with rough tables and chairs and settles by the fire. Blazing up, the flames showed me the landlord—a huge fellow, red-headed, unshorn, face fat and drink-flushed. He had on a thick pea-jacket open at his hairy throat, loose breeches belted at his middle, and sea boots covering his legs. He cast at me a curious look ; his gaze passing to my guardian then, he seemed to regard Mr. Pounds with no greater favour than he did myself. The flames, leaping through the logs and seacoal on the great hearth, guarded by an iron roasting-jack, were reflected by the dazzling display of polished pewter on the shelves, and revealed the flowers painted on the china ; and the smoke, as the wind rumbled about the chimney, blew out into the room, as if to cure the hams, the bacon and the dried fish hanging there, with ropes of onions like fat round pates among them.

‘ Sit down by the fire and warm ye, sir and young sir,’ growled the giant, pointing with his clay pipe to a settle. ‘ It’s well for ye I’m about, or you’d have gone cold and hungry for two hours or more.’ And indeed the hands of the smoke-blackened clock pointed only to the hour of five.

‘ You’re out of bed early, my friend,’ said my guardian, yawning as he loosened his shawls from his neck.

‘ Yes, it’s early ! When a man can’t lie easily abed, there’s always the one reason. You’re married, sir, I take it, and this young gentleman’s your son ? ’

My guardian purported to yawn again, and made him no reply.

‘A woman!’ said the landlord. ‘That’s why I’m about at this hour of the morning.’

‘Your wife?’ asked my guardian, laughing.

‘Aye, aye, sir, my wife! She’s robbed me of more sleep with that tongue of hers than I may make up this side of Resurrection Morning.’

‘We’re as anxious for bed as you must be,’ my guardian reminded him; and muttering, ‘Aye, to be sure!’ the fellow busied himself in slicing ham, sticking upon the fire a frying pan which, ere he set the table, was hissing and giving out a delightful odour of rashers. Muttering to himself, as of his grievance against his shrewish wife, the landlord spread the table with a white cloth, bread, a jug of milk, curiously fine china, and knives and forks with handles stained red and blue. Taking from the cupboard then a black bottle, he set himself to compounding a draught of brandy, sugar and hot water for my guardian.

† All this while, wearied to death, I perched on the settle by the fire, and my guardian standing before the blaze in his favourite attitude, gave me never a word. The landlord, bending over the fire to tend the rashers, cast queer and furtive glances at me; looked from me to my guardian; and looking back again seemed now to regard me with a rough pity.

‘You’re for the Black House, I suppose?’ he growled at last, handing my guardian the steaming glass.

‘For the Black House, yes,’ said Mr. Pounds smoothly.

‘Putting the boy to school there?’ asked the landlord with a queer grin.

‘My friend,’ said my guardian dryly, ‘do I question you about this very excellent brandy of yours?’

‘Oh, no offence, no offence, sir. Somehow, I took it to be the Black House. A drop of brandy for the lad?’

‘Weaker than this,’ said Mr. Pounds, sipping his liquor appreciatively. ‘He’s too young to be carried abed drunk.’

‘D’ye know Mr. Gandy?’ pursued the landlord, as he mixed a glass for me.

‘He’s a friend of mine,’ my guardian told him. ‘A fine brandy this of yours, my good fellow.’

I saw the landlord’s face darken, and I understood that my guardian was hinting that, if the smuggling of the brandy was none of his business, his purpose of placing me in Mr. Gandy’s house was equally not a matter for question. Apprehensive of Mr. Gandy’s propensities and of the probable brutalities that awaited me in his establishment, I had grown so far inured to harsh treatment in Pounds’ own house, that boy as I was, hating Pounds and his sister so, I had accepted my transfer from London to Corbe even with eagerness. I had reasoned to myself that at least I should be quit of the hateful company of Josiah and Lavinia; at least I should find companions of my own age; at least I could suffer no worse

at Mr. Gandy's hands than at the hands of my guardian's Methodistical kinsman, Mr. Jonah Rigg, from whom I had received such knowledge of letters as I possessed. Only the landlord's queer looks and questions of my guardian troubled me for all my weariness. What manner of man was this into whose hands I was to be delivered, and whom, I took it, the stout, besotted fellow, now busying himself with the preparation of our breakfast, viewed with no great favour ; and who, I had it from my guardian, had been seaman, and had sailed on what manner of cruises over the world, ere he turned schoolmaster in so lone a place as this ? Yet the potency of the French brandy, my weariness, the comfort of the rashers, of which I ate my fill, so weighed me down with heaviness, that as one bemused I followed with my guardian the landlord, when he lighted the way for us up a creaking stair and into a little room, where a huge feather bed invited to repose. So weary was I, when they left me, my guardian taking the precaution of turning the key upon me, that I could scarce keep awake long enough to pull off my shoes, and I tumbled clothed into bed, where I fell instantly into a sound sleep.

IT was nigh ten o'clock ere my guardian, spruce and fresh after all the rigours of the journey, conducted me downstairs that morning. I had made a makeshift toilet, from a ewer of water and a jack towel, ere I dressed, but I was yet heavy of head—maybe from the fumes of the brandy—and weary from the miles we had covered the day before. We made our way into the kitchen ; it seemed to pass as ordinary in the inn ; and on the table a meal was ready for us. Of my friend the landlord I saw no sign ; and well I guessed that the little woman who curtseyed a welcome to us had dislodged him from his warm quarters by the fire. She was Quakerish and prim, her kersey gown covered by a white apron, a stiff mob cap on her neat hair ; she had a pinched white face, and a thin nose tipped frostily, a cunning bird-like manner of perking her head aside, while she regarded us with quick black eyes. The scent of coffee, and hot rolls, set on the hearth, with a platter of fried fish, was welcome to me on the chill October morning.

My guardian bowed in response to the landlady's curtsey and wished her " good morning."

She paused to regard him with her head cocked on one side, but beyond the merest movement of her lips she made him no response. Indeed, though we had her husband's word for it that she had a tongue, and plied it to his discomfiture, she might have been a mute, as she waited on us at breakfast, pouring out coffee, serving us with fish, rolls and butter. My guardian was abstracted and moody, and stealing a look from time to time at him, I saw that his brows were bent, almost to the exclusion of his little eyes; he gave me not a word, and he ate an indifferent meal, but he drank cup after cup of coffee as though parched with thirst. For myself, I had good cause for contemplation, in apprehension of my lot with Mr. Gandy at the Black House, over and above all in the question that was constant with me—who was I, and how had I passed from my parents' care to the charge of Mr. Pounds? I went by the name of James Thorne; of my parentage I had no inkling except that Miss Lavinia had pronounced me on occasion 'Spawn of the Devil'; and that her brother in his cups that night had declared my father to be a rogue, mercifully underground. Nor was there any one save Pounds and his sister of whom I might pursue my questioning; no servant, for by the acidity of her tongue Lavinia could attach no retainer to her, and the service of the house, while I had lived in it, had been carried out by a succession of young women. Indeed, I was induced to the belief that my very curiosity—my questioning of

Pounds and Lavinia and their kinsman Rigg—had confirmed my guardian in his purpose of placing me with Mr. Gandy that I might embarrass him no further with my interrogations and the chance of discovery when he was in his cups. At times, seeking ever to solve the secret of my birth, I would lie for hours in my bed striving to compel my mind back to any recollection of the time before I came into the care of Pounds. I could recollect nothing, beyond playing as a tiny child in the weedy garden at his house, or in the chill kitchen, apprehensive lest Lavinia's wrath should not spend its force on the head of the kitchen wench for the time, but descend on me, and my body suffer for it. Companions I had none, save Rigg's precious pair—a girl older than myself, and a snivelling brat of a like age to mine, for both of whom, as patterned upon their parent, I had a profound dislike. Such tenderness as I had known I had experienced from the kitchen wenches, one good-humoured girl in particular, who would spare for me the parings of her larder, till Miss Lavinia's discovery led to her dismissal. Of books my guardian possessed a store—scandalous romances for the most, I fear—whereof I read my fill, when the eyes of the she-dragon were off me; and from such stuff I had at least acquired a distorted knowledge of the world, and a certain dim understanding of the lot of such as I was, having no father to whom to point. Indeed, my understanding had checked me in a measure from questioning my guardian

lest the answer should mean shame to me; nor was I able to put from my mind the recollection of a furtive conversation between a kitchen-maid and a butcher, he asking, 'Who's the boy?' and she answering, 'Some poor brat. The least asked the better. Not the Cat's, anyways——' she being under notice of dismissal at the time and venomous to Miss Lavinia.

I had finished my breakfast, and awaited my guardian's permission to leave the table for the fireside, when the landlord strode into the room with a load of logs which he dropped on the pipe-clayed hearth with a loud clatter. Instantly the quiet woman woke to stormy life.

'What's this?' cried she shrilly. 'A flingin' logs down on a clean hearth; an' undoin' all the work I've been slavin' at since break o' day. Sayin' nothin' o' disturbin' the gentleman at his breakfast.'

'If I didn't bring 'em,' he protested, quailing before her, though her mob cap was barely as high as his shoulder, 'you'd be namin' me all the idle villains for lettin' the fire go down. There's no understandin' you!'

'Understanding! You with your addle-pate. You! Ain't I sick an' tired of tellin' you that I won't have logs thrown down on the hearth, when I've been a cleanin' and a cleanin.'? Is it any use my speakin' to you?'

'Come to think of it,' he answered, scratching his trowsled head, 'I don't believe it is.'

'Ugh—get along with you!' cried she

shrilly. 'I've no patience with you.' And as he quailed before her, she whisked out of the room, banging the door with as loud a crash as the fall of logs on the hearth.

'My friend,' said my guardian, 'you have my sympathy.'

'Thank 'ee, sir.'

'But 'twill keep—'twill keep! Mr. Gandy's establishment is about four miles from here—if I remember.'

'Four miles as the crow flies. Only you can't fly. A rough track, sir. Your carriage could never make it.'

'Which means, I suppose, that I've to hire a vehicle from you?'

'No, sir, I've only got an open cart, and it's a chill morning and like to rain.'

'Still, you can drive me and my ward up thither, I suppose?'

'Jim, the hostler, can drive you, sir.'

'Well, please give him the order. I propose to be well on the way back to London by night. And thanks to my lying in bed late it's nigh noon now.'

The landlord, nodding and giving me another of his queer looks, withdrew. My guardian, pulling his chair up to the fire, sat gloomy and abstracted—paying no heed to me and giving me not a word—not seeming to hear me, when, purposing to question him of his plans—how long I was to remain with Mr. Gandy at the Black House—I called him by name. While so we sat in silence, there came a stir at the door, and into the room there strode a gentle-

man whose dress and demeanour captured my attention instantly. He was, I judged, not yet forty years of age, though his handsome face, fresh now from the weather, was masked with hard lines about the mouth; and his fine eyes were bloodshot. He had the merest strip of black whisker, his black hair curled under the brim of his high hat; the cut of his brown riding coat showed the lines of his strong vigorous body; his legs were cased in white buckskins, and glittering black tops. He carried a gold-headed hunting crop in his gloved hands. And this gentleman swaggering in, bold and confident, stood suddenly stock-still, as his eyes fell on my guardian, and to me it seemed that for a moment the colour went out of his face, to return suffusing it scarlet. My guardian had turned in his chair at his entry, and now had started to his feet; so the pair of them stood staring the one at the other—neither taking pleasure at the meeting. From my guardian the gentleman's look passed to me, and when the fine eyes caught mine, it seemed to me that he gave me a look of hatred, ere they flashed from mine back to my guardian.

'So, Pounds,' said the gentleman angrily, 'you're here!'

'As you see, sir—I and the boy.'

'The boy! Whose boy? Come, Pounds, what's this trick you're playing me?'

'Mr. Corbe,' said my guardian, 'I'm playing you no trick, I promise you.'

'Then what the deuce are you doing here?'

My guardian cast a swift glance at me, sitting staring from the settle, at the arrogant angry gentleman and at him, finger to lips, his fat red face revealing his trepidation.

‘Mr. Corbe,’ said Pounds, ‘I assure you I am not neglectful of your interests in London ; my clerk can do all that is needed. I am here—out of town—with the intention of putting my young ward—this lad here—to school with my friend, Mr. Simon Gandy. With whom, Mr. Corbe,’ and at this it seemed to me his lips curled back malevolently—‘you yourself may chance to have some passing acquaintance.’

I did believe from the false ring in his voice that he lied, and that he purposed to prevent further outburst from the gentleman within my hearing. Mr. Corbe’s laughter in answer seemed to me to ring as falsely.

‘With Gandy—at the Black House ! Oh, you’re a rare dog, Pounds, a rare dog ! Do you know the gentleman with whom you’re placing the young dog ?’

‘To be sure, Mr. Corbe, I know him well. A disciplinarian of the old school—under whose charge this promising young gentleman is not likely long to stray from paths of rectitude. D’you see, Mr. Corbe, this fellow was getting out of hand at my house in London ? We are here. And on our way to Mr. Gandy’s scholastic establishment for the sons of gentlemen.’

‘As you’re here, Pounds,’ returned the gentleman ungraciously—striving it seemed to retain

command over his passion, 'I'll have a word with you now—if you can spare me the time'—with a sneer on his lips.

'I am always at your service, Mr. Corbe,' purred Mr. Pounds, and with a wave of his hand to me, 'Wait outside, boy!'

I went wondering—not so much at the behaviour of the gentleman towards my guardian as for his knowledge of me—shown clearly in the look he gave me—in his perturbation at the sight of me; most for the odd sense of his familiarity to me. To my certain knowledge I had never set eyes on him at my guardian's house—yet in his handsome insolent face, in his bearing, there was something strangely familiar to me. And, as I passed out, hearing him mutter angrily to Pounds, I wondered whether, indeed, this should be a kinsman of mine. Black curling hair, and mine was black and curling; strong body—mine was strong for all my scanty rationing under Miss Lavinia's housekeeping. I would have given much—I would have risked the cruellest flogging—to have sneaked back and heard what passed between the two; but that in the stable yard the landlord and his men were busied harnessing a lean horse to an open cart in readiness for our journey up to the Black House, which, as I assumed from the conversation between my guardian and the landlord, was situated high on the cliffs. I had not been wrong in my belief that the cliffs went high above the village. As I strolled forth in the pale sun leaking through the sea fog—

having no mind to stay for a word with the innkeeper—and out under the archway into the cobbled street, I saw that the village was set in a deep break between the cliffs, cut out I took it, by the waters from land and sea. A stream flowed seawards nigh the inn door, and the few houses forming the village—fishers' cots for the most—were lined on the terrace of rock on either side of its bed; at their backs the cliffs stood high. The road by which we had come through the night passed away through reed-grown marshes; seawards a little jetty extended from the beach; out on the waters, whereon the sun, as the mist parted, fell with a myriad of gleaming lights, I could see the sails of a few fishing-boats making home before the breeze. The inn itself was of brick, two stories high—the brick crumbling with age, the slates upon the roof moss-grown; only the sign, it was *The Gold Scales*, with the name of 'Jonas Wall' appended, was newly painted. A daub of yellow paint was purposed clearly for the fish with golden scales—in truth the artist's skill was such that no one would have made out the purpose of the brush, save for the explanation in his lettering, 'The Gold Scales.' A rough settle was placed immediately under the sign; Mr. Corbe's black horse was hitched by its bridle to an iron ring let into the brick. No one was abroad about the inn, though on the seashore below me I could see a little group of fisher folk, and the shrill clatter of women awaiting their men was borne up to me.

Miserably I stood before the inn regarding the fishing village of Corbe with a scant interest ; my thoughts busied with the gentleman, his manner to me, and what now passed between him and my guardian. Yet when he came out presently, and mounted the horse, without giving me look or word he galloped away. While I stared after him, my guardian's voice called after me, ' James—James—where is the boy? Oh, you're there, my lad! We'll be on the way now for Mr. Gandy's.'

THE abstraction which had possessed my guardian from the hour of arrival in Corbe had passed from him, when we set foot with my baggage in the little open cart. It reeked with the smell of fish, and its planks were slippery with scales. Out we clattered from the inn—the lean horse proving a strong enough brute, and the driver, a loutish youth, plying the whip so long as we passed over level road. But, when we had crossed the stream, we took a rough track going by a stiff grade till it brought us after an hour's jolting up to the level of the cliff itself. The height was strewn with broken rock—much as if piled up by the hands of men; where a break occurred in this wall I could look out over the sea, blue now, and glittering in the sun, or inland over fen and rolling down. Stretches of grey green reeds and coppice, with a single curl of smoke as the only sign of human habitation. The wind swept up from the sea, and buffeted us. To left below us I could hear the roll of the waters, and sometimes a great wave breaking upon the cliffs and shooting high, the spray would blow with the wind on

our cheeks, and the sea-fowl flying up before the surge whirl shrieking over our heads. All the while we moved along the cliffs, or dipping down into some hollow crawled slowly up again, my guardian's laughter and his jesting rang in my ear. He had drunk a dram of brandy before we set out,—maybe another with the gentleman—and his mood was merry.

'Happy, James!' cried my guardian. 'Entering into the most joyous time of youth—school-days with young companions—all the wisdom of the ages to be unfolded to you by a preceptor learned and sagacious as Rigg was dull and ignorant. Here in this delightful spot——'

A jolt of the cart, as the wheel struck a stone, almost flung him for the moment from his seat, and I was quit for a time of his mockery and laughter. Our driver all this while had paid us scant heed, centring his attention on his horse, though from time to time, I did believe that he cast sidelong glances at me, and that there was in his regard of me the odd admixture of curiosity and pity that I had noted in Jonas Wall, landlord of *The Gold Scales*.

We had been toiling by the road over the cliffs an hour or more ere we came in sight of our destination. The Black House was set in a cup of the cliffs—the wall of rock going high above it, and the road leading to its iron gates. I could not conjecture what freak had induced any man to set his dwelling in so lone and almost inaccessible a spot—later I was to conjecture that it was but the

shred of some old fortress so built ages before, that its occupants might be immune from danger from the dwellers on the lowlands or raiders from the sea. The Black House—in the sunlight it shaped to me as a great building of black blocks of stone—black pines about it—outbuildings, a meadow of green grass, and a dark tangle of gorse and brushwood fringing the edge of the broken bowl of the cliffs wherein it lay.

My guardian waved his gloved hand airily towards it. 'Your new home, James,' he said. 'You enter its gates as an unlicked cub. I promise you, you shall leave it as a grown man—a man with a most useful knowledge of men and the ways of men. How d'ye like it, James?'

'More like a prison,' I muttered, 'than Newgate itself.'

'James, James, this is prejudice. I fear me I must make you known to Mr. Gandy as a most ungrateful dog—beg him for your soul's sake to flog you, until you are grateful to me for all my thought and loving care to you. You grieve me, James.'

I gave him not a word in answer, as we climbed the last steep grade. At the iron gates—rich in scroll and ornate in design—our driver leaped down and plucked at the tongue of a bronze bell, to bring some one to admit us. And presently I heard the sound of some one stumping over the stones, and I made out peering through the iron at us a most villainous eye. I say a villainous eye, for the fellow had

but one—the other had been struck out by a blow as if from a cutlass, which must have bitten deeply into brow and jaw. He was an old man, and clad in loose blue rig of a nautical manner; he had but one hand, for the left he had an iron hook, with which he attached himself to the gate as a bird to a twig. He was a stout fellow, with a stubbly grey beard on his chin; his one eye was sea-green; from under his red cap—like a Frenchman's—a mass of lank grey hair tumbled about his ears, and these ears were weighted down by a big pair of silver rings. The slash which had struck out an eye, had lent an additional ugliness to his aspect; his nose, swollen and bulbous, was slightly askew; his mouth was wide, his lips tobacco stained, and from the constant working of his jaws he mouthed a quid.

'Who's there?' demanded this pretty gentleman, ere he set key in the lock.

'Gentleman to see your master, Ben,' the driver told him. 'Come, don't keep us waiting all day.'

'And what may the gentleman's name be?'

'Mr. Pounds,' my guardian told him. 'Your master's expecting me, my good fellow.'

Thereat spitting out tobacco juice, the fellow set his key in the lock, and, screeching, the bolts shot back. And the iron gate swung on its hinges, and stepping down my guardian and I passed within the precincts of the Black House.

Bidding the driver hand my box over to the

old man, and to await his return, Mr. Pounds took me by the hand, and led me up towards the front of the house. I noted with some amaze that the place was laid out tastefully enough with a trim lawn of grass, bordered with flower beds, wherein a few rich blossoms yet bloomed, and that the path we trod was strewn with white sea-shingle and shells. None the less, the house, to which a flight of worn stone steps led up, was like a prison with its high frowning front, its door and windows barred with iron. The iron knocker of the door was fashioned grimly as a death's head, and the red rust which ran down from it suggested to me congealed drippings of blood. It was rusted so stiffly that when my guardian sought to raise it he failed, so that he must needs rap hard upon the oak with the knob of his cane. The baying of a hound and a woman's shrill voice sounded within; and the clattering of clogs over the stone ensued. The door, shrieking upon its hinges, opened to us, and a stout, personable woman of middle age looked out on us. She wore a kersey gown and a mob cap, but she had for shawl a swath of some stuff dyed richly with crimson and blue, and this, with the olive colour of her skin, her shining earrings, and her black bold eyes, gave her the appearance of a foreigner. She nodded merely in answer to my guardian's salutation and, bidding us come in, clung till we had passed her to the collar of the great hound—muzzled, yet growling menace to us. The closing of the door left us momentarily in darkness, but to

our right a door opening, a tall figure appeared in welcome.

‘Mr. Pounds, and young sir,’ said a deep, rich voice, ‘you are very welcome. This way, if you please.’

MY guardian responding heartily, 'Ah, my dear Gandy!'—propelled me forward into a well-lit room. I found myself face to face then with my preceptor. I confess that my first impression astonished me. I had expected to meet some brutal fellow like the one-eyed seaman at the gate. But here before me was a tall, stooping gentleman clad in the neatest of black—with silken stockings, knee-breeches, and shoes with silver buckles after the manner of the old school. He was of a fine presence; he was, it might be, three score years and ten; his features were clearly cut, and dominant, and his face lit by a commanding pair of sea-blue eyes. The bronze of his skin as from tropic suns and sea spray was emphasized by the silver whiteness of his hair, falling back from his broad forehead, and worn long—almost to the shoulders. His neck-cloth was as white as his hair. Beyond the twinkling buckles of his shoes, and a little ivory pendant to his watch-chain—it was shaped as a skull, with green stones like emeralds set in the sockets of the eyes—he wore no ornament. But when his hand took mine on my guardian's

presentation of me, I found my fingers caught in a grip of steel ; and while he crushed my hand, till it seemed the blood must spurt from beneath the nails, he assured me in a silver tone, all the while smiling on me benignly, ' I am most happy—most happy, my dear child, to receive you as my pupil.' Releasing me presently, he closed the door, and bade us be seated.

If I had not been prepared for the aspect of the man, I was no better prepared for the richness of his room. It was an octagonal chamber, the panelled walls lined for the most with cases of books, bound richly and tooled with gold. Before the window looking out on the level lawn was set a great desk, of some dark wood veined finely, and polished till it shone as a piece of tortoiseshell. Mr. Gandy had been writing—for papers were set out with quills and sandbox, and an ink-horn—this ink-horn with a bronze top fashioned as some sea monster, with little pearls for eyes and tusks of ivory. The polished floor was strewn with a variety of Persian rugs ; the chairs of the dark wood were cushioned with rich stuffs, so that the lights of their gold thread, their rich blues and crimsons, lent a glow of colours to the room. A coal fire burnt on the wide hearth ; above the chimney-piece was arranged a collection of glistening knives and swords ; four paintings with the same precious colours as marked cushions and rugs hung on the walls ; from the centre of the ceiling was suspended by thin metal chains a great lamp of cunning work-

manship in some fine metal that seemed to me silver, set with yellow glass. But most my eyes were held by a press standing against the wall directly opposite to the hearth. It was a high piece of it, might be eight feet or more, and of a curious blood-coloured wood. Into its surface some cunning artisan—belike of the East,—had wrought a variety of flowers and fruit and little figures of men and monsters—all in lacquer, pearl-shell and silver, with a profusion of fanciful imagery of which I had never known the like before. And in the window where the sunlight fell a parrot sat upon a gilded perch, having a thin chain affixed to its leg—a big parrot with feathers of as bright a blue and as blood-red as the hues of the silken cushions and the Persian rugs.

Maybe in my first sight of the room I took in little of the rich furnishings; but in the days I was to pass in the Black House I came to know it so well, that in my mind it is pictured to the last little figure of pearl shell and silver in the lacquered press. For the time, indeed, I recollect that my attention was held by the gentleman who bore the name of Simon Gandy. He bade us be seated—so placing us that the light through the diamond-paned windows must have fallen fully on our faces, while he with his back towards the sunlight sat with his face shaded to us. And yet from the shadow I marked his eyes glowing with a curious light that a man sees in the eyes of an animal through the darkness.

‘Mr. Pounds and you, lad, are very welcome.

Your engagements, Mr. Pounds, will permit of your remaining some days in the house as my guest?'

'My engagements, sir,' said my guardian, 'call me back to London to-night. You had my letter?'

'Oh, aye, I had your letter. I thank you for it. I esteem your confidence in me.'

'Who should know you better?' purred my guardian.

'Precisely—who?' Mr. Gandy returned, with the suspicion of a sneer, I fancied.'

'Here is a pupil standing in need of your particular care, sir. A headstrong and undisciplined fellow——'

'Would you prejudice me against my pupil?'

'Oh, no, the lad's well enough. A little wholesome correction, and I promise you he'll prove tractable. Make a scholar of him, sir—don't spare the birch or cane—so that you make a scholar of him.'

'And to what end, sir? What's your purpose with him?' His question was put simply and in the silver tone that he had employed throughout our interview with him.

My guardian seemed to suspect an inner meaning in the question, if I might judge by his discomposure, and by his answering testily, 'You had my letter, sir?'

'I repeat—I had your letter. I was unable to judge from it whether you had formed any clear purpose regarding the lad. With what object I was to have charge of him. To what

I was to the best of my poor ability to shape his mind.'

He appeared to take a bitter amusement from my guardian's embarrassment. The ghost of a smile flitted across his lips.

'A liberal education,' pronounced Mr. Pounds, 'is a qualification for any career.'

'You honour me, sir, by your reliance in my poor powers.' He bowed his head politely to my guardian. 'A liberal education. An education that may make him an ornament to the Bar—a successor to yourself, sir—though an unworthy one. Or, again—if the lad incline to an adventurous calling—a knowledge of navigation—so far as a landsman may acquire that knowledge. A year or so and the lad shall qualify for——'

'Execution Dock!'

My guardian and I started in our chairs. A grating, rasping voice, with a devil of malice in it—or so it seemed to me. And on its gilded perch the parrot, rocking to and fro on its chained leg, shook with uncanny laughter. Mr. Gandy was imperturbable.

'Not an omen, my young friend,' he said smoothly. 'I would have said a midshipmite. My bird does you and me an injustice.'

And 'Execution Dock! Execution Dock!' shrieked the parrot. I saw that my guardian had not recovered from the shock of the bird's interruption. His face was pasty grey; his fingers clutching the knob of his cane, twitched as they had twitched when I had questioned him that night, and he had spilled his snuff.

Mr. Gandy's observant eye noted my guardian's discomposure, as I noted it. Rising from his chair—he was a six-foot figure of a man, I saw—he caught the bell-rope and rang. 'You'll take refreshment, Mr. Pounds,' said he, 'your drive over the stones from Corbe has shaken you.'

'Nay, I'll do well enough,' my guardian muttered.

'A glass of wine—a sup of brandy?'

'As you will, sir—thank you!'

The serving woman answering the bell, he gave her instructions in a low tone—all the while the parrot on its perch shook with demoniacal laughter.

'Mr. Gandy,' said my guardian, as my preceptor resumed his seat, 'I'll have a word with you alone, before I return.'

'You'll dine with me, sir?'

'As I say, I'm for London to-night—thank'ee. Maybe you'll make the lad known to his companions.'

'Surely, when you've refreshed yourself. My bird, I fear, has startled you.'

'I confess I was not expecting it. You brought it back with you from a voyage——'

Mr. Gandy, sitting in his black chair, took a grim pleasure, or I misjudged him, from my guardian's discomfiture. 'I bought him for a dollar in Vera Cruz,' he answered, 'Of a Spanish seaman. He has small conversation. "Execution Dock" with which he startled you, I fear, is his staple remark. The fellow hath a very devil. What should have been his his-

tory I find it amusing to conjecture from his speech. I take it he frequented evil company. "Execution Dock," a few oaths, and a smattering of Spanish and the talk of English seamen; his years—I estimate them at a century. What may those wicked little eyes of him in their blue wrinkles have looked upon? Swamp, and forest—the green forest of Yucatan, maybe—for I tell you but my fancy! And brought down by a shot from a fowling piece—he hath a damaged wing—or by an Indian's arrow. And, maybe, sold to a rogue, a foul-mouthed, blasphemous fellow, and on some ship—may it not have flown the Jolly Roger? My young friend' (addressing me), 'have you fancy enough to picture the ship's company—cargo for Execution Dock, and fit to hang there as cut-throats should? I tell you, Mr. Pounds, listening to this bird—I do picture the Main—the blue of it, the gold sun of its sky, and the great gold moon that lights its sea by night. And I picture me a ship of evil—built for swiftness, as a bird of prey is fashioned. And I see the decks of it—I smell the reek of the pitch, the very sweating bodies. I see the fellow at the wheel, the rogues who dice and shuffle the cards, and quarrel for the stakes. The stakes—gold coins and silver seeming to me stained with the one blood—red! Blood—that the red sunset pours into the sea! Blood, that has run upon those very decks! And my parrot—with his blood-red plume—shrieking—as he shrieked his omen "Execution Dock!"' "Execution Dock!" cried the parrot, and

again my guardian, who through this long harangue had sat biting his nails in bitter distaste for the theme—while I remained intent and wondering—started again from his seat.

Smiling that odd smile of his, Mr. Gandy proceeded. 'This ship—those rogues—this bird! A choice associate for honourable men, and an ingenuous youth!'

'Slit his throat!' shrieked the parrot. 'Ha! Ha! Ha!'

'Here is the evidence,' said Mr. Gandy smoothly, 'that this bird has frequented the company of evil-doers. That his neck should have been wrung with the rogues whose partner in crime he was—turned off years since, I pray, at Execution Dock!'

Shrieked the bird instantly, 'Execution Dock! Execution Dock! Ha! Ha! Ha!'

THE foreign-looking woman returning bore with her a bronze tray with a decanter of green glass, and two goblets of yellow crystal. Entering noiselessly, setting the tray down noiselessly, she withdrew without word. My guardian, while Mr. Gandy poured wine into two of the glasses—no doubt accepting it that as a scholar of his I should not expect to take wine with him—mumbled that the woman was well schooled.

‘Is this not a scholastic establishment?’ says Mr. Gandy, handing Mr. Pounds his glass.

‘I warrant that before I set eyes again on my young friend here,’ cries my guardian, laughing, ‘you’ll have him as well disciplined.’

‘If he need it—aye!’ affirms Mr. Gandy, lifting his glass. ‘Yet I think the lad will prove tractable. Mr. Pounds, your very good health.’

‘Mr. Gandy, yours!’ and sips his wine with a very nice appreciation of its value. ‘Your cellar, sir, is worthy of a gentleman of your discernment. A rare wine! The sun’s in it!’

‘A Spanish wine! I hesitate to tell you its age, Pounds, lest you think I lie. Yet I do

assure you the grapes were crushed a hundred years since; that this precious juice went overseas with a Viceroy, whose throat was never to be warmed with it.'

'And why?'

'I take it,' smiled Mr. Gandy, 'that it passed from Spanish hands into the keeping of some Englishman. Nay, I'll not trouble you with its history. Your glass is empty. Permit me!' And filled it till the bubbles floated from the brim.

Assuredly it was a very precious, potent wine—for my guardian, seasoned toper as was he, flushed with its magic. I perceived the chill amusement on Mr. Gandy's face. And while plying Mr. Pounds with its vintage, he himself drank no more than the one glass. And, as if marking what its influence was on my guardian, he says, 'You require a word with me in private, Pounds,—ere you take your leave?'

'As you will,' replies Pounds thickly.

'As *you* will,' returns Gandy smoothly. 'Touching your plans for this young gentleman—your inclination—his—for his future in life. Or maybe the lad is a child of fortune, and you will have him trained solely in the humanities and——'

'Fortune!' grunted Pounds sullenly. 'Fortune! I tell you, Gandy, the lad's a charge on me.'

'I compliment you, sir, on your benevolence.'

'And I care not how you shape his mind, providing only you flog the devil out of him!'

‘Nay, sir,’ protests Gandy, smiling, ‘that is not my method!’

‘Slit his throat!’ croaked the parrot. ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’

‘Bird,’ said Gandy, ‘you’re not kind. I assure you, Pounds, that the rod hath little part in my curriculum.’

‘Egad,’ growls Pounds, ‘you’ve changed, Sim Gandy.’

‘I’m wiser, sir,’ retorted Mr. Gandy, with sudden compression of his brows and curl of lip. And I saw the light burn from his eyes, as he looked fixedly upon my guardian.

My guardian, though flushed with the wine, seemed to realize Mr. Gandy’s displeasure. For, muttering, ‘I did but jest, sir,’ he leaned forward, and unsteadily replaced the glass upon the tray. ‘I waste your time,’ he said then. ‘A word or two with you alone.’

‘Will you take your leave of your charge now?’ asked Mr. Gandy. ‘If so—I’ll conduct him to his schoolfellows.’ And rose, and opening the door, stood apart from us, as if to give us privacy.

My guardian looked upon me with his malevolent little blood-shot eyes. ‘Well, you dog,’ says he, ‘well? You’ll be a good lad, if you’re wise. Or you’ll pay for it, I promise you. What, no tears—no grief at parting from me?’

‘I’m glad,’ I whispered, hating him, yet apprehensive of Mr. Gandy.

Whereat my guardian scowled an instant at me, then burst into a roar of laughter. ‘At least you’re honest, you dog,’ cried he. ‘We’re

well rid of you, Lavinia and I, and you of us—hey? ’ prodding me with his cane.

‘Aye,—well rid!’ I muttered, scowling at him.

He sat eyeing me furiously awhile, Mr. Gandy all this time waiting in silence. He made as if to stretch out his hand, then changing his mind, scowled blackly at me, and cutting at my legs with his cane, muttered, ‘Well, go, you rogue! Go! Take him away, Gandy!’

And as I drew towards the door, Mr. Gandy’s hand grasped mine, not with that steel grip of his, though firmly enough, and drew me from the room. As the door shut upon me—liking my company and the sinister nature of Black House ill enough—I heard the parrot’s laughter combining with my guardian’s chuckling.

‘This way, James,’ said Mr. Gandy; leading me down a dim passage, wherein I could make out only the dark shape of a press, and a cluster of cloaks hanging like dead men from the wall. Under my feet I felt a soft carpet, until he led me down a flight of steps across a paved court, lit by a high skylight of glass, and up to a heavily-studded door. Turning the key left in the lock, Mr. Gandy propelled me forward into a great room panelled and floored in black timber, and barely furnished with a high desk and stool, as if for a pedagogue, a long desk below it with a form for the scholars, a big globe of the world on a bronze stand, many books on a shelf, a settle before the hearth piled with brush and logs ready for lighting.

Above the high desk was suspended with chains from a bolt in the oaken beam a lamp of similar curious workmanship to the lamp in Mr. Gandy's study. The room was lit by a wide window, extending for half the space of the room, bars before it, a carved window-seat of black oak below it. Leaning on the window-sill with his back towards us, and staring out over the sea—for I could make out that this window immediately overlooked the sea—was a lad of about my own years. He paid us no heed on our entry, seeming deaf or sullen, until Mr. Gandy, stalking forward, smacked him soundly on the seat of his pantaloons, whereat, shooting round, and scowling, he stood staring at me—his hand clapped to the smart. He was a fair fellow, his yellow hair tumbled over his brow. He was stoutly built, with a handsome face for all the scowl upon it. He wore nankeen breeches, a blue jacket, a cambric shirt, with a swath of blue silk at his loose collar.

'I fear,' said Mr. Gandy smoothly, 'you're an idle fellow. I leave you at your books and find you staring out to sea. And your thoughts wandering away from conjugations to the Azores. Eh, Robert? Howbeit, here is a companion for you, Robert; you'll make him very welcome, will you not, lad?'—all this with an urbanity that seemed to sit naturally upon him. 'Your new companion's name is James Thorne. James, this dear lad is Robert Orme. Shake hands, young gentlemen!'

I gave Robert Orme my hand gladly, liking

the bold looks of him for all the scowl upon his face. Aye, and his hand gripped mine, and for the first time in my life—I do avow it—I felt in his warm grip the sense of comradeship, by which the future kindness of any kitchen wench to me as a little child were, to be sure, as nothing. If Robert Orme were to be the pattern of my schoolfellows, I should be happy even in the Black House—for all the menace that had oppressed me from my approach to it.

Says Mr. Gandy, smiling upon us with approval, ‘I’ll leave you together for the improvement of your acquaintance, lads, while, James, I take leave of your guardian.’

And, leaving us, locked the door upon us, while, shy enough, I stared at the lad leaning against the window-seat. At the clash of the key in the lock, young Orme gripped me by the arm with some show of excitement, and says he, ‘Why, are you to be kept here, too? With me.’

‘To be sure,’ I answered him wondering. ‘My guardian has brought me here—to school.’

‘To school!’ He laughed at me. ‘School! Here! Why, is the old villain turning school-master in truth and in fact?’

I stared at him. ‘Isn’t this a school?’ I asked. ‘Aren’t there other scholars here?’

‘Devil a one!’ says he, laughing. ‘I’m the only other scholar—at your service. And I’ve been here these six months, and like to go mad for want of company. Not accounting Gandy or the woman Keziah, or the one-eyed hang-

dog, Ben. Oh, I warrant you, I'm glad to have your company. Here in this prison ! ' ;

' Prison ! ' faltered I.

' What else ? I take it my saintly kinswoman paid a fat fee to Gandy to have me out of her way. And that fat fee out of my patrimony, I promise you. But, young Jim, why are you here ? Your guardian, said you ? Paying for you out of his trust, while he spends the remainder. Is that it ? '

' I don't know,' I answered dully. ' I heard him say a while since to Mr. Gandy—he paid for me out of his own pocket.'

“GANDY!’ he said, muttering low, as if for fear lest the woman Keziah should be eavesdropping. ‘He’s an odd fellow. I take it from his speech—and from that macaw of his—he’s been buccaneer, pirate, the Lord knows what in his day. Turned schoolmaster in his old age,—gad, Jim, he’s a scholar for sure, but no schoolmaster, I promise you. Jim,’ whispering, ‘I take it, from what I’ve seen—not that I’ve been permitted to see much—the fellow makes a fat living from French brandies and laces and what not—that never paid duty. Jim, beneath this place—under the floor of my bed-chamber—you’ll see it soon enough—there’s sure a cavern—maybe going out through the cliffs into the sea. Belike, where the cliff parts on the road to the Black House. I’ve sounded the floor with my boot, and sure it rings hollow. Aye, and at night I’ve seen flares burning out at sea. And marked a light winking from the cliffs—down there!’

Leaning with me through the bars before the open window, I saw then that the wing of the Black House from which we stared looked

sheer down the cliff; indeed, with the swell that rolled in sullenly from the sunlit waters, great rollers broke upon its base, and the fine salt spray was blown up to the very ledge. Orme was pointing to a break in the cliffs far down to our left, where it seemed to me that the sea washed as if into a cavern, for the sound like a mighty drumming came thence above the roll of the breakers beating on the rocks below us, and above the shrilling of the whirling sea-fowl.

‘A smuggler,’ said I, wondering the more. ‘And why are you and I in this house?’

‘Jim, mine’s a tedious story. I’ll tell it you later. But this at least I believe, that Gandy’s an odd mixture of adventurer and scholar. Maybe, the fellow who brought me to this pass, and maybe your guardian, have some knowledge of Gandy’s calling past and present, and have a hold on him to correspond. Did you hear that parrot of his screech “Execution Dock!” and croak like a bird of ill omen?’

‘I heard him, yes.’

‘That’s a favourite cry of his—“Execution Dock.” And there they hung pirates. And Mr. Gandy, scholar and smuggler, has been freebooter. Our friends have a knowledge of this, so our friends have an influence over Gandy. And, further, I believe that Gandy as a scholar has a fancy for playing school-master. Imparting his knowledge to such as you and me.’

‘And flogging?’ asked I.

‘Nay,’ he answered, laughing, ‘he has no fancy for the rod. He’s flogged me only once since I was brought to his house.’

‘What was that for?’ asked I.

‘For no more than a conjugation,’ he answered, grinning. ‘A matter of book-learning. As might any schoolmaster. No, Jim, Gandy is tolerable enough, I promise you. But its being imprisoned in this place, and having no more freedom than the space of these cliffs. Until you came, the loneliness!’

‘I’ve been alone all my life,’ I said. ‘I was brought up by Pounds and his shrew sister. But, Rob, what’s the purpose of our being brought here?’

‘In my case, I think, as I’ve told you, Jim, that my kinswoman might have me out of the way and spend my patrimony. My father was of John Company and wealthy. And this kinswoman, a cousin, was sought in marriage by as devout and mean a fellow as she was a devout and mean spinster. I warrant the banns have long been called—aye, and the knot tied between Elizabeth Orme and John Eggleston, trustee with her of my father’s East India stock—in keeping for my father’s son, Robert Orme.’

‘What hold should either have over Mr. Gandy?’ asked I.

‘Eggleston had some knowledge of him. ’Twas he that brought me here. ’Twas he that talked with Gandy apart, and seemed to bend him to his will, while I waited at the door,—out of hearing of what passed

between the pair, but understanding how the fellow Eggleston wrought upon Gandy's will. Jim, I've fancied sometimes that Gandy in his old age would have turned virtuous—become schoolmaster indeed—planned as much, but that those who knew him in his youth,—the lawbreakings that were to his account,—desertion. mutiny, piracy, or what not—determined otherwise for him.'

'But what?' I persisted, 'is to be the end—for us?'

He flung his head back boldly. 'Jim, does it matter?' he asked, and laughed at me. 'Can we avert it?—I'm glad to have you with me, and for the time what else matters?'

L YING abed that night with Rob Orme asleep beside me, I found good cause for cudgelling my brains. The question—what was the purpose of Mr. Pounds in placing me in the custody of Mr. Gandy at the Black House—and the question supreme, who was I, and how came I into the keeping of Josiah and his sister Lavinia? Rob Orme, I believed, had afforded me by his story a guidance to the solution of my own mystery. He was in Gandy's keeping while the executors of his father's will expended his patrimony. And was I in the Black House for similar reason? And how long should he and I be held prisoners—for prisoners we were, and might not pass beyond the rusted iron gates, though we were free to wander about the cliffs around the Black House at will.

Having taken leave of my guardian, Mr. Gandy returned to release us from the room wherein he had locked the pair of us. Whatever had passed between him and Mr. Pounds, I saw as he entered, had occasioned him poor pleasure. His face—pallid for the most—was yet flushed as from a burst of passion, and his

blue eyes yet sparkled like a glittering sea. Yet he smiled presently benignly upon the pair of us, and his voice was smooth as he addressed us.

‘So, lads, you have become acquainted,’ said he. ‘And are like to be friends. Aye, aye,—that’s well!’

And approached with that soft catlike walk of his, and put his hands upon our shoulders. ‘You may quit your books for the day, Rob Orme,’ he said. ‘To-morrow, James, you shall start in your pursuit of learning. It cannot be too soon, for the way is long, and life is all too brief. So this afternoon for the open air, and to-morrow for the Latin primer. And maybe the rod, whereon, James, your worthy guardian was so insistent, eh, James? You’ll be diligent accordingly, eh?’ This with his queer smile at me.

Now, had I not come to the Black House in circumstances so strange; had my guardian not filled my mind with suspicions of Mr. Gandy—I must have responded to the beneficence of my preceptor. But, regarding him as no more than my gaoler—knowing that in the past he had led the life of an adventurer—maybe a freebooter—suspecting him from Rob Orme’s words of being a smuggler—I made him no reply, but hung my head. He chuckled with amusement, and patted my shoulder benevolently.

‘I’ll warrant you’ll prove diligent,’ he said. ‘And now, as ’tis well past noon, I take it your stomachs are as empty as the heads of the

pair of you. Take your companion down to the kitchen, Rob. Keziah should have a meal prepared for you.'

Accordingly we got out of the room—the two of us—leaving him standing at the window, and staring out at the sea. I followed Orme across the court below the schoolroom, and passing with him down a fresh flight of steps, came out with him into a gallery—much as an open balcony. It ran the full length of the wing of the house—three doors admitting into the dwelling. From it to the right as we clattered along it, I saw that a high tier of steps went down into a grassy space, shut in by a low stone wall; beyond this the rocks rose terrace by terrace to the summit of the cliff. In the grass cattle and sheep were feeding.

The third door to our left was open, and led into the kitchen—a cheery place with just such a provision of bacon and smoked fish as I had seen in the kitchen of *The Gold Scales*; just so dazzling a display of brass and pewter; just such a hearth—though, indeed, all this was on a smaller scale. The woman, Keziah, rising from the fireside, where she had been tending the meat upon the spit, stood silently regarding us with no special show of favour on her dark face. Rob Orme, laughing at her sour aspect, clapped her freely on the shoulder with his hand, and said he — 'The master says you're to serve up your best, Keziah, for this gentleman and myself.'

A slow smile parted her lips; and she pointed

at me. 'He is to remain here, hey?' she asked with an odd inflection.

'Why, to be sure! More company for me, Keziah, and the like for you. What's in the pot?' leaning over the fire, and lifting a lid, whereon a most savoury steam came forth.

'Twill serve, Keziah,' he assured her, sniffing appreciatively; and she, smiling still, signed me to sit down at the kitchen table. She spread a cloth, and set upon it spoons and wooden bowls with a loaf of bread. Taking a ladle then, and rapping at Rob Orme's skull, to dislodge him from the hearth, she lifted off the pot, and filled the bowls with a most appetizing stew. Moreover, as we bent over this provision, she drew us from a barrel a mug of beer apiece, and, while we ate and drank, stood silently regarding us, the smile seeming fixed upon her lips. Rob Orme held the sinister company at the Black House in no sort of awe. As he ate and drank, he rallied her—'Your health, Keziah!' with a smack of his lips at his mug of beer . . . 'This ollapodrida does you honour, Keziah!'—and the like. At all of which the silent woman uttered never a word, only smiled immovably.

And from the very joyous raillery of his, I came to understand the nature of Rob Orme, who could be merry in such a place, and under such custodians, while in London the trustees of his father's estate—he had good reason to believe—dissipated the fortune that should be his. Sullen he had seemed, when first I clapped eyes on him in the schoolroom,—I call it so

for want of a better description—indeed he told me later that mooning there he felt like going mad for sheer loneliness. Yet my coming, dull companion as I must have been, had put heart into him; and with me he was hopeful that his life in the mysterious house might yet be tolerable.

We saw no sign of the one-eyed Ben throughout our meal. He, with Keziah, Rob told me, made up the staff of servants at the Black House; and for the most was quartered in a little stone cottage nigh the iron gates. 'We'll see him soon enough, I promise you,' whispered Rob, when Keziah, stirring up the fire, seemed safe from hearing. Full and hearty from our meal, the pair of us snatching up our caps, were making from the kitchen, when Keziah, darting upon us to stay us, asked shrilly, 'And where would you be going—you?'

'Up the cliffs,' Rob told her. 'We've Mr. Gandy's leave. You needn't fear, Keziah.'

'Stay here!' she ordered us. 'I'll ask him. You stay here!'

'Ask him!' cried Rob indignantly. 'You'll but have to toil upstairs and get no thanks for your pains.'

She eyed him doubtfully; but, nodding her head, stood aside, and together we scampered forth. Laughing, Rob led the way across the terrace and down the steps into the meadow caught in the cup of stone.

'Have we to ask her,' I queried, 'before we can leave the house?'

'She's watched me as a cat a mouse,' he

answered. 'But that she knows we have no chance of escaping, Ben, and there's no other way out, she'd have loosed the hound ere she'd have let us out, till Gandy directed her. What she's been to Gandy in his heady youth, I'll not guess. The Lord give us charity. But she serves him well, and has a pretty gift for cookery.'

'And the fellow Ben?' I asked.

'He's cheated the gallows yet,' Rob told me. 'I vow the old dog should have swung years since at Execution Dock. He has the evil eye. Moreover he's threatened to flay me with a rope's end, if I go near the gate. He'd have done so long since but for his dread of Gandy, who retains the sole right of correction. But Gandy's a schoolmaster, and flogs only as a schoolmaster. We'll make up the cliffs, Jim, that you may see what a prison we're in.'

The steps had brought us down into a stony track that cut the meadow grass. This led us presently to the crumbling wall of loosely piled stone, over which we climbed easily. Thence the track took us by a steep grade up to the brow of the cliff, a stiff climb that breathed me, though Rob climbed it easily, and for all the pounding at my heart and shortness of breath I must needs keep up with him. The path climbed soon between rough boulders of rock, fretted with the wear of centuries; and to retain a footing we must needs cling to the stones, and by them draw ourselves higher. But at last, gasping, I stood with Rob on the

very brow of the cliff—a flat ledge with a pile of stones upon it as if to afford a look-out, or to hold a man, if the gale should strive to beat him down, or daring to glance below him, he should be seized with a vertigo, and pitch into the surge. For before us the cliff went sheer, two hundred and fifty feet if I might guess, into the sea. And the great waters beat upon its base, with the sound of war drums, and as they smote upon it, with so mighty a force that the solid rock seemed to shake, they broke high into the air, and flung up their spray as snow before the autumn wind. The breeze blew stiffly from the sea, ice-cold upon me, sweating from my climb; flying before it like a monstrous white bird I saw a great ship afar—an Indiaman, Rob told me—shrieking in my ear, as I clung to the rocks, so that he might be heard above the drums of the sea. The October sun burnt feebly in a clouding sky; the waters magnified its light in myriad white fires; and here the sea was blue from the heavens, and there grey from the clouds, and all white-capped, as the breeze momentarily seemed to grow in strength, and sweep up from the south. Sliding down to the shelter of the low wall of rocks and drawing me beside him, Rob Orme pointed down to the Black House immediately below us. For the first time I saw it wholly. 'Twas a great pile, built it seemed upon a jutting crag, high above the sea. It had the shape of a thick cross and it was fashioned solidly as the cliff itself, from the dark stone piled broken on the cliffs. It

was of three stories in height, its many windows were barred with iron; its peaked roof of a black slate. I marked the terrace and the steps that led down to the meadow where the cattle were feeding; beyond it I saw a line of grass, before the thick stone wall and iron gates shut it in. Below the wall the rock went down a hundred feet or more; up this we had toiled that morning by a zigzag track which scaled it; across it rose the cliff, not precipitous but steep again; beyond this occurred the break in the cliff where the sea washed, and by which Rob had surmised the smugglers with whom the master of the Black House had dealings bore in their contraband. Inland, the cliffs fell like a wall, and I saw a great stretch of reedy fenland, rolling up into downs. Afar, it might be four miles off, I could make out the roofs of a house glittering in the sun, and the smoke that blew from a chimney stack.

'Whose house is that, d'ye know, Rob?' asked I.

'Tis Corbe,' he answered. 'Corbe—the Manor House. Keziah, when she's been cheerful, has told me that its mistress dwells there—a widow, says Keziah. And a proud madam, Keziah has added with a sniff. Corbe—the family's lived there for centuries, says she. And maybe built the Black House for a stronghold. Why, what a task for the King's revenue officers, Jim, if they should ever seek to smoke out Gandy. 'Twould need an army to take; it would for sure!'

At his mention of Corbe I recalled the handsome gentleman who had looked so blackly on me at *The Gold Scales* that morning.

‘There was a gentleman,’ said I, ‘at the inn this morning. A fellow dressed finely, and black as the Knave of Spades. A fellow whom my guardian knew and addressed as Corbe. Who should he be, Rob, d’ye know?’

‘It should be John Corbe,’ he answered. ‘Keziah has told me of John Corbe—young cousin of the Corbe that’s dead. But what should the fellow be doing in *The Gold Scales*. Says Keziah he games and wastes in London—the Regent’s his patron. And that his cousin’s widow lives lone at Corbe. He’s gamed away the rest of his estate, Keziah says.’

I REJOICED that by Mr. Gandy's direction I was to be quartered for the night with Rob Orme. I promise you that this first companionship of my youth had ripened, ere the day was out, into brotherhood. Ere we climbed down the cliff in the late afternoon—marking, indeed, Keziah summoning us with a waving cloth from the terrace—I had all the history of his life with his sour kinswoman—devout as Lavinia she must have been, and as shrewish—and he had mine. And much wild conjecture had been ours concerning the purpose of our incarceration in Gandy's household, and what the end of it should be. But this at least resulted—that his gay confidence in the event lent courage to me, whereas timorous from my life with Mr. Pounds, and from his threats to me, I had imagined that a cruel fate awaited me for my sins. Yet Rob assured me of Mr. Gandy's easy kindness and accomplishments; and by his speech revealed a grudging liking—if not an admiration for him—for his erudition, his courtliness, for the very flights of fancy that took him wandering leagues overseas to the Main where he had sailed and to

the ports he had frequented in a youth—I feared me—unregenerate.

He stood awaiting us upon the terrace, wrapped in a green mantle that fell to his knees and having a black hat pressed down about his ears against the chill of the wind now seeming weighted with rain and blowing up thunderous from the sea. As we toiled up the steps he beckoned to me, and when I stood before him, placed his hand upon my shoulder and commenced to pace with me to and fro, while Rob Orme disappeared within the house. And pacing so, I was subjected by him to a rigorous questioning concerning my knowledge of Greek and Latin and ciphering; and I fear me in my nervous trepidation of him I made a poorer showing than I need. A full half-hour this inquisition proceeded—he mild and grave and courtly, smiling on occasion at my worst flounderings. I tell you I might have been with the most scholarly of masters; he made no show or sign of the curious mood that was upon him, when first I sat within his presence, and when his speech had conjured up for me the picture of the Main and the West Indies and the ports of the Buccanéers.

‘Why here,’ he said at last as he released me, ‘is an unploughed field. Here is a scholar after my own heart. Given diligence, and I shall make a scholar of you, James. Such a scholar as your guardian would have you.’

In awe of him I hastened to assure him that I should endeavour to please him.

‘So shall we be friends, James,’ he answered

smoothly. 'And though the Black House be so lonely a place, and our society small, I feel that the time will not hang heavy on our hands. It is my conception of the store of knowledge a gentleman should have, that he should be acquainted with polite romances and with the verses of our poets. Therefore, I shall place in your hands the works of our English poet Mat Prior. This you may con, ere you sleep to-night. And for variety a romance of Le Sage—*Gil Blas*—done into our own tongue. Now I shall light you to the schoolroom—for the stairs are dark—and I shall put into your hands these books, when you have supped.'

I paid him my thanks, as he led the way along the terrace. In the gathering gloom of approaching storm, the house was dark within, but groping inside the door, he struck flint on steel, and presently lit a candle, and so preceded me up to the schoolroom. A fire burnt high on the hearth, for the dying day was chill, and the draughts blew in by the window, beaten now with the wind. Rob Orme was staring out to sea, but the driving spray from the surge that roared below dulled the pane, and only a grey tumbling expanse seemed to mingle with the lowering clouds could I make out, when—Mr. Gandy leaving me at the door—I made my way to him. He flung his arm about my shoulders, and in silence the pair of us stood staring out till the dusk falling blotted out the tortured sea.

Meantime, the logs upon the hearth had burnt up into a roaring fire,—the salt in the

brine-soaked ship's timbers burning blue ; and the heat which the flames gave off inviting us from the chill of the window. We had established ourselves upon the settle, ere Mr. Gandy returned with the books from his library, and a taper, with which he lit the lamp. I saw then how fine a piece of workmanship was the lamp—it was of yellow glass, whence the light from the wicks illumined the dark room with a gold light.

‘Why, when ye’ve supped,’ said Gandy, benevolently, ‘ye should pass a rare evening. Sit ye down, lad’—for I had risen at his entry—‘I remark that you have the politeness that Robert lacks. I warrant, too, that you have a love of books that his addle-pate deprives him of. Here is your *Gil Blas*, and here the works of sweet Mat Prior. I lay them on the desk for you to read them there, lest the fire shrivel the covers.’

Standing, rubbing his chin, as I thanked him, and regarding us, ‘The fireside,’ said he, ‘is the centre of the English home. The blazing log upon the hearth, the storm without—good fellowship within, a glass of wine, a romance of adventure—Defoe, Le Sage, or Cervantes and his mad gentleman—what should a man want more? I can imagine the lure of such a hearth as this to draw a man back from wandering up and down the world. What the Main—the tropic seas, and the isles that are, like green gems set in silver—whereof I told you, James, when the macaw screeched this morn—as against this hearth? Hark to the

envious gale without, as if nature hated our peace, and sought to break in on us, and sweep us with the storm. . . .'

He had spoken with the curious abstraction that had held his thoughts from my guardian and me that morn, when his mind had crossed the leagues of sea for the Spanish Main. Recalling now Rob's estimate of him—as an adventurer grown sated, and in his age harking back to peace in England, and finding none from the influence of men who knew the sins of his youth, and held him to law-breaking, when he fain would live as schoolmaster—I did believe that in his words—"what the Main and the isles like gems, as against the English hearth on a wild night?"—he was revealing to us his troubled mind.

At the window now, and peering out on the troubled night. Lord, how the wind shrieked at him, and the sea roared up, and the driving scud splashed on the leaded panes! And, suddenly, his laughter rang out above the tumult of the storm—wild, maniacal, defiant—that brought me trembling to my feet, while stolidly, Rob Orme, who, no doubt, had known him in such a mood before, sat staring at the fire.

As if in answer to his defiance, the wind blew up with a terrific sound; with wave and wind all was tumult. As the storm was battering as with mighty hands upon the walls and roofs of the Black House, and rumbling down the chimneys—driving out ash and sparks in a yellow whirl into the room, shrieking as souls

in torment—Mr. Gandy turned from the window and passed by us to the door. I heard him mutter, ‘God, what a night! Like as the souls of dead men rode on the wind!’ And I saw that his white face was twisted—tortured—and that his eyes were set and glassy as a sleep-walker’s.

ROB ORME, as the door clashed after Mr. Gandy, burst into a peal of laughter. 'What possesses him?' cried he; and, grinning at my scared look, shot out his hand and pulled me down by him. 'Scared you to death, did he? I tell you, Jim, you'll grow accustomed to his moods. Though, truth to tell, I've never known him in a madder frame than this night—nor heard the wind so wild'—shivering a little for all his boldness; while the wind screamed and pounded over the roofs, as if wild riders swept in from the sea.

'What you said—a while since,' muttered I. 'Striving to live honestly and compelled against his will.'

'Quiet, Jim,' he whispered. 'I hear Keziah. She'll hear.'

Keziah, opening the door quickly, came silently into the room, bearing our supper—a steaming broth in bowls, coffee, crisp rolls of bread. She set the tray down on the desk, while Rob Orme, leaping up, gave her greeting. 'Aye, Keziah! And supper, I'd forgotten both, so late is she!'

‘Late!’ she answered, smiling. ‘Then you should be abed, you and he!’

‘Oh, aye,—bed? Does he share the four-poster with me, Keziah? Or where have you quartered him?’

‘The four-poster, yes!’ she answered. ‘And the master’s order is, that you be abed by nine o’clock! No later! ’Tis after seven now.’

‘Bed—well, it’s reasonable on such a night, Keziah. I’m much afraid we’ll not lie quiet. Hark to the wind! I fear ’twill bring the house down about our ears, and fling us all to drown in the sea!’

For all his laughter, I saw her face turn white, and, as involuntarily, she crossed herself.

‘That will be the end!’ cries Bob, laughing at her terror. ‘If not to-night—some night, when we’re all lying comfortably abed, with never a thought of our sins.’

‘If not to-night some night,’ I heard her falter; and suddenly—as the wind roared up again, and the voices of the storm cried their menace—she clapped her hands to her ears, and scuttled from the room.

‘Why, they’re haunted!’ cried Rob, laughing still. ‘Gandy and she, Jim. ’Tis no school we’re in, you and I. We’re locked in Bedlam. Bedlam, Jim! We’re madmen, you and I, Jim. We hadn’t thought it. That’s why we’re here. But, Jim, the broth grows cold; and we need food and drink if we’re for hell to-night. Pray, heaven, Keziah wears more than her shift!’—catching up bowl and spoon and thrusting them into my hands.

I confess that I was unable to enter into his mood. The terror of the storm without, which had flung its spell alike over Gandy and Keziah, was on me, too. Yet the rich, hot broth, the bread and the coffee, which we shared, lent me a certain heart again ; aye, and Rob Orme, understanding my mood, quitted his wild raillery, and, sitting by me nigh the fire, assured me that I need have no dread of the storm. For the house, I saw, was built solidly on rock, and had stood secure through the storms of centuries—such a storm as now was terrible without. And he told me that his days in the Black House—save for his loneliness—had passed tolerably enough ; that Mr. Gandy was by no means an ill fellow ; that if he had trounced him on one occasion, he took it that the fault was, after all, his own—no less than an incorrigible distaste for the Latin tongue. With our conversation, I had time only to glance at the books which Mr. Gandy had set upon the desk for me, ere the door was pushed open, and the evil face of the one-eyed Ben appeared. He was in an ill mood, for when Rob greeted him—cautiously enough, I noted—he muttered, savagely, ‘ You’re to get to bed. An’ no palaver ! ’

Nodding to me, Rob followed, with me after him ; Ben stumping on before us, a lantern swinging from his hook, keys jingling in his hand. He led us across the flagged court—it was chill as a grave—and up a flight of steps corresponding to the flight which led into the schoolroom. Unlocking the door, and

having much ado to close it for the force of the draught—whereat he cursed foully—he brought us up a black and creaking stairway to the highest floor. At the head of the stairs, I made out in the light of his lantern a landing, deep with dust, whence an intersecting passage led to the doors of the rooms, four in number, I took it, corresponding to the cross of the house. He brought us into a low chamber towards the sea—above the schoolroom—wherein the light of the lantern revealed to me a high four-poster, with curtains, as cerements, moving in the draught like wings. This, with a press, a table with basin, ewer of water, towels, a chair, completed the furnishings. Rob's garments hung from a line of pegs on the wall; my own chest lay opened by the bed. Lighting a candle on the table—the draught blew it out thrice—Ben left us without a word, dragging the door to with a crash, and turning the key upon us. The chamber was chill as a vault, a musty smell penetrated it. As Rob, lifting the candle out of the draught, held it up, I saw that the beams of the ceiling above were cobwebbed and black with dust; mildewed in great patches from the damp leaking in from the roof. I saw, in the centre, a trap-door was cut, and that from the iron ring set in it, a shred of broken rope, strung with cobwebs, moved in the wind eerily to and fro.

‘I’ve a notion,’ said Rob, setting the candle down, and perching on the bed to pull off his shoes, ‘some rascal hanged himself there long

since. And that if I wake in the night I shall see his body swing to and fro. Therefore, I always draw the curtains of the bed.' Stripping, then, for all the cold, he poured water into the basin and scrubbed himself with a towel, ere he drew on his shirt.

' 'Twill warm you, Jim,' said he, as I sat shivering and melancholy on my chest. So, though shaking as with ague, I followed him, and presently tumbled into the bed—the sheets were as ice—beside him.

Awhile, after he had blown out the candle, we lay chattering in the dark, but soon he dropped off to sleep; yet I, though snug and warm, lay wakeful, pondering over all that had passed since first I was brought down by my guardian to Corbe. And, though the figure of Mr. Gandy was stamped most clearly on my mind—and I pictured him in all the moods he had revealed to me that day; and though, in my prayer to God, I was most thankful that he had given me a friend, who now lay sleeping easily by my side—I found my mind returning constantly to the dark, handsome gentleman, John Corbe; my sense of his familiarity to me; his evident distaste for me; and his perturbation at the sight of me. Aye, and I thought of Rob Orme's story of the lonely lady dwelling in the Manor, that had been her husband's, and, for all I knew to the contrary, dependent for her livelihood on the charity of the very wastrel who was the intimate of the Prince Regent. Found myself wondering madly, whether there could be aught of kinship between

me and the gentleman, black as I was black, coloured freshly as I was coloured. Kinship that should give me kinship to the widowed lady in the Manor House across the fens. And all the while my thoughts were running riot, the storm was terrible without ; and the walls shook with its forces ; and whirl of wind and beat of sea sounded as cannonades ! The curtains shook and waved, and their rings rattled ; I did believe that grisly fingers sought to pluck them back ; I did believe that unless I held my eyes shut fast, I should behold the face of the man who, surmised Rob in his mad fancy, had hanged himself from the rope still held by the iron ring.

Yet, at last, for all my whirling thoughts and terrors, I fell asleep, to dream—dreams of John Corbe, and of a woman whose face I might not see. All through my dreams I did believe a voice called to her—her voice—and that it was very sweet and gentle, as my mother's might have been.

I AWOKE to find Rob clutching me—and for the moment I thought in panic that some phantom—the suicide's—had me, and I screamed out lustily.

'Nay, Jim—nay, Jim,' cried he, 'I'm sorry that I scared you. But I heard the sound just now like the gun of a ship at sea—and saw a flare through a rift in the curtain there. Come to the window, Jim!'

He had dragged back the curtain and sprung out of bed in wild excitement—so shaking yet I tumbled after him; and stood shivering by his side. The storm was mighty still, but the rain had ceased, and through the racing clouds the pale moon looked down on a scene of terror. I could make out the cliffs below us, and the spray that broke high from the rollers; I could make out the ocean in a wild whirl of waters; ere the clouds veiled the moon's face and all was blackness. Blackness—not all, for suddenly Rob gripping at my arm cried in my ear, 'The light,—mark the light!'

Before us the cliffs shot out jutting arms in the form of a half moon, going high at either extremity above us. And on the height to

the right, where we had climbed the afternoon before, I marked a flare of light as in a cresset, that burning an instant was dimmed, to swing out again presently and once more to be blotted. And to the left on the cliff fronting the cliff whereon the Black House was built, I saw three dancing lights that bobbed up and down and swept to right and left, and sometimes were submerged utterly.

‘So,’ breathed Rob Orme into my ear. ‘Ben’s lanterns and the cattle. Wreckers! They lure a ship into the reefs that run Corbe way.’

‘Wreckers!’ And as he spoke there came a spurt of flame from the sea and a gun boomed out above the tumult of the wind and wave. And while we clung to the window-sill, in terror, from the blackness burnt a blue light that showed us the shape of a great ship; masts and spar and rigging in that blue flare—ere it died out, and all was dark once more, but for the evil eye of light that winked from the cliff above us, and the lights that danced on the cliff afar.

Rob Orme turned back to snatch a blanket from the bed, and wrap it about us both. He was shaking with excitement, while I was sick with horror, understanding that here played out before me was one of those grim tales of ships lured to their doom by wreckers’ lanterns—such tales as I had read in the news-sheets in London.

‘Can we do nothing, Rob?’ gasped I. ‘Nothing to save her and those on board.’

‘What can we do?’ he answered vengefully.

'She's nigh inshore. She'll strike. And what should we do—locked in this prison, while Gandy and his company——'

His vengeful mutter ended suddenly—for the key had turned in the lock, and the door was open. And looking in upon us, a lamp held high above us, stood Mr. Gandy, gaunt and cadaverous, his body wrapped in a quilted crimson gown, a tasselled night-cap on his head. Sternly he regarded us an instant, ere he cried angrily. 'What's this? Not abed, you dogs? Why, I'll flog the pair of you.'

And advanced upon us, his lamp swinging, the Malacca cane he had borne on pacing with me on the terrace raised vengefully. Staring at him in terror, I saw that his eyes were aflame with wrath, and that his lips were cruelly curved. Another instant and the cane had whistled about our bare legs, when Rob Orme, darting forward, caught at his arm, crying excitedly, 'Mr. Gandy,—sir—there's devil's work about the cliffs to-night. See!' pointing excitedly out to where the lanterns burned on the cliffs, though the cresset on the height was not perceptible. 'See, sir—wreckers—wreckers! There's a ship nigh ashore! They've led her in to destruction.'

Mr. Gandy in the lantern light seemed to control his savage wrath by a supreme effort. 'Lanterns upon the cliffs!' he said, contemptuously.

'And on the cliff above us, sir.'

'Nay, Rob, Rob—who save my servants should have access there?'

‘I tell you, sir,’ gasped Rob, ‘we saw a light upon the cliffs. You saw it, Jim—you saw it.’

‘I saw it, sir,’ I affirmed. ‘Like a flaring cresset.’

Mr. Gandy stood but a moment staring up at the cliffs, but no lights showed. All the while Rob and I were crying in excitement that there was a ship driving ashore; clutching at his robe, begging him to make some effort to save her and her crew.

‘The men of Corbe,’ cried Mr. Gandy, to be heard above the storm, now at its height, ‘are smugglers and wreckers from one generation to another. A ship—say you, lad—a ship——’

Suddenly through the night came a great crash louder than the storm. Aye, and terrible the cry that went up to heaven in long-drawn agony.

‘A ship!’ cried Gandy. ‘She’s struck! She’s struck! Out on the Dragon Rock. God save their souls!’ And turning upon us fiercely, gripped us, and flung us easily upon the bed. ‘Be quiet, the pair of you,’ snarled he, ‘or I flog you both in the morn till the blood runs! There’s work for me and my fellow abroad to-night! To bed with ye, to bed!’

And snatching his lantern up sped from the room, with all the vigour of a man in the prime of strength, while in the day he had seemed to be burdened down with his years. The door clashed on us once again; the key turned in the lock; once more we were prisoners. We were back at the window ere the door was

shut. But the moon was lost in the clouds ; but the blackness of the night enshrouded all things, the cliffs and sea ; and the lanterns burned no more. We durst not open the casement window for the terrific wind and for the scud that beat upon it—if we believed that we heard aught, wild cries upon the night, it might as well have been the shrieking of the wind as the scream of wretches drowning from the wreck.

‘He’s gone,’ shrieked I in Rob Orme’s ear, ‘to bear them aid—he and Ben!’

He cried back Mr. Gandy’s words, ‘God save their souls! For some one from the Black House—Ben maybe—aided the men of Corbe to lure them! The light up there! God save their souls!’

KEZIAH released us soon after sunrise. A sleepy pair she found us, yet washed and dressed and eager for release. We had slept little till towards dawn, when the wind was dropping, but for all our vigil by the window we had seen the lights no more, or heard aught from the sea but the roar of waters. Nor did the sunlight on this morning after storm reveal much to us of the night's dread event, for though the wind was fallen, and only a sweet breeze blew, the waves yet broke so high and flung up such showers of spray that we could scarce catch a glimpse of the sea itself below the cliffs. But when at intervals we saw the rolling waters momentarily, we believed that we could make out barrels and spars afloat as from the broken wreck.

'You'll come to your breakfast in the kitchen—now,' commanded Keziah. 'And 'tis the master's orders that, as you value your skins, you'll not quit the house till his return.'

'And where's the master this morn, Keziah?' queried Rob Orme, as we stumbled down the stairway in her wake.

'He's ridden to Corbe,' she answered glibly,

as if repeating a lesson. 'A ship went ashore in the night on the Dragon Rock. The master thinks from lights he saw on the cliffs it was the work of wreckers. He has ridden to Corbe to tell the King's officers what he saw. Or, if not too late, to help the poor men from the ship. You are not to go out!'

'And Ben—has he gone with him?' asked Rob.

'The gate,' snapped Keziah, 'is locked, and I—I have the key.'

Rob winked at me, as we followed Keziah along the rain wet terrace, and into her cheerful kitchen, where porridge and bread and coffee awaited us. So close were we at her heels that she had not time to snatch down and bear away a lantern hanging on the wall—ere we had noted, the pair of us, that it was rusted with the weather, and that sea-salt was crusted on it, aye, that caught in it was a tuft of hair as torn from a cow's poll.

Trolling a song, as if he had not noticed the woman's sudden dart at the lantern, Rob sat down at table facing me, and saying nothing till she returned to wait upon us. She looked at us, as she handed us bowls of porridge and a jug of milk, and her aspect was lowering and suspicious; but Rob falling on his breakfast, and rallying her that there were lumps in the gruel, she wore soon her smile; and waited on us with the silence that was habitual to her. And to his questions when our meal was over, and we were lounging by the fire, she answered only in monosyllables. Did she know what

ship it was? No! Had any one got ashore did she know? No! Had Mr. Gandy said when he expected to return? No!

He snatched up his cap at last, and growling 'Come along, Jim!' ran out of the kitchen with me at his heels. She fluttered after us, crying shrilly, 'You're not to leave the house! D'ye hear? Not to leave the house! The master ordered! He'll flog you! He will!'

Rob Orme and I raced down the steps into the wet meadow, now all agleam in the sunlight. The cattle fed in the shelter of the wall over which we had climbed on the previous day. But though he made towards them, he pulled up presently and said to me, 'We'll pay for this, Jim; he'll baste us black and blue! D'ye want to make back?'

'Not I,' I answered. 'I'll risk the rod. I'm not thin-skinned. Let's go down to the cliffs.'

'Not that way, Jim. We could see nought for the surf; and we'd risk being washed off. This way!'

He raced up the hill from the sea, and skirting the frowning Black House, brought me presently out on the green turf before Mr. Gandy's window where the parrot rocked on its gilded perch. Keziah was at the door before us, and screeched after us, 'I'll loose the hound on you, if you will not come back.'

The hound bayed from the hall; but laughing back in answer Rob flew like a hare across the grass—I panting after—and dashed up to the gate. It was locked, doubly secured by an

iron chain. But the years had eaten away the mortar of the stone wall, and gripping the gatepost Orme swung himself up, and digging his toes into the crevices was presently astride the wall and hauling me up after him. Letting ourselves drop on the turf ten feet or so below us on the other side, we landed safely and were off scampering down the narrow space between the wall and the cliff. This, widening out, presently brought us up to a bluff of broken rock above the sea. I do not think Rob Orme had any clear purpose save that he was eager as I to have a view of the wreck, if it should be left still on the reef. Indeed, when clambering up after him through the broken rocks, I muttered to him, 'Rob, d'ye purpose escaping from the Black House and making for London?' he called back, 'No, what's the use? They'd only haul us back. Have you any friends who'd help us?'

I answered sadly, 'No!'

'We'll have a look for the wreck, then,' he cried, 'and make back! Gandy will flay us for this—I promise you.'

We were out of sight of the house at our back, and the valley where the road went down. All about us towered the great rocks; before us we could hear the beat of the waves upon the cliffs. The sea-fowl sheltering against the storm paid us scant heed, but before us presently, as we were approaching the brow of the cliff, they wheeled above in clouds screaming shrilly. And suddenly Rob, climbing before me, slid back, and putting his fingers to his

lips whispered, 'Hush! Lie quiet! Some one—Gandy's above us on the rocks—I heard his voice. Keziah lied. Oh, Lord, he'll skin us!'

We lay together sheltered under a jutting rock, immediately below the brow of the cliff, I thought from the roar of the sea. And suddenly I, too, heard Gandy speaking above us,—clearly, angrily.

'How d'ye come here? From some ship you say? What ship?'

'*The Virginian*, from New York . . . tobacco . . . cottons,' some one was answering, some survivor from the wreck, I did believe, as we lay listening intently.

'How did you get here?'

'God knows! Climbed up the cliff.' The voice was hoarse and broken.

'How came she piled up there?'

'Wreckers! I'll swear 'twas wreckers! Stranger, 'twas wreckers. . . . Whose house?'

'Why d'ye ask?'

'Because the lights that brought us in shone from that place . . . higher. . . .'

'Lights from the windows?'

'Lights from the windows don't swing and drift as those lights. . . . Wreckers!'

'Are any saved but you?'

And there was menace in his tone, such menace as when he had come upon us suddenly peering forth from the window watching the lights.

'How should I know?' faltered the voice, and the surf thundering up we lost the sound of all that passed between them. Save that

presently I heard a cry—a dreadful cry as that which had sounded from the sea—only very faint, when the cry in the night had rung to heaven through the storm. Clutching the rocks in terror Orme and I lay silent, staring at one another with wild eyes.

And down the rocks came clambering nimbly our preceptor. He was passing us by, when his eyes fell upon us, and he started back, and for a moment stood regarding us with flaming eyes. His right hand clutched at his breast, as if some weapon were concealed there; then recovering himself and stooping over us he snarled, ‘What do ye here, you dogs? How long have you been here?’

‘Only this instant,’ lied Orme, white and shaken as I. ‘As you came down the cliffs . . .’

‘You had my orders from Keziah?’

‘Yes, sir . . .’ faltering.

‘And disobeyed——’

‘Sir, we were mad to catch a glimpse of the wreck . . .’

‘Are ye not lying to me? . . . How long——?’

‘I tell you, sir, this instant . . .’

He laughed savagely, his hand now swinging his supple cane. ‘I’ll have discipline,’ he said. ‘I vow I’ll be obeyed by my scholars. Come ye here!’

WE passed the remainder of the morning, Rob and I, locked in our bedchamber. Lord, how Mr. Gandy had basted the pair of us, and how my body ached! Never had chastisement from Mr. Pounds fallen so heavily upon me! Till wearying, as his cane snapped across Rob's breech, he flung the fragments down, and grabbing the pair of us by the collars of our jackets he propelled us before him down the rocky way—vowing, 'I'll have discipline in my house—egad, I'll have discipline'—with bitter reiteration.

Unlocking the gate he drove the two of us into the house before him—the hound cowering at his feet. And how Keziah leered perceiving us rumpled and bedraggled, understanding the fate which had befallen us. But savagely he bade her begone to her kitchen, and like a fluttering hen she fled before him. He marshalled us then in his study before him, and now, composed, read us a pretty lecture on the necessity of obedience to our parents and preceptors—quoted to us Holy Writ, construed a tag of Latin, and warned us of the fate which must be ours, if we should stray afresh from

the paths of rectitude. And 'Execution Dock! Execution Dock!' interjected the screeching parrot, rocking on its perch. So he ordered us to our room for the remainder of the day, and driving us helter-skelter before him, locked the door upon us.

Awhile we groaned and rubbed our hurts, forgetful of all else, till with the recollection of the adventure on the cliffs—the questions, the strange voice, the threat, the cry—I staggered over to Rob Orme leaning sullenly against the sill, and whispered, 'Rob—Rob—d'ye think he did murder on the cliffs? Flung some poor wretch down!'

He nodded blackly. 'Hist!' he whispered back. 'No more, it's not safe. Not in this place! The walls seem hollow . . . like the floors! . . . Jim' (lips to my ears), 'we mustn't stay here! He'll do us to death, if he should think . . . we heard! We must escape! . . . When we can! . . .'

'Whither?' I whispered drearily. 'Who'll protect us? Who'll believe?'

'There's sure—some one! Be still!' clutching at my arm. And indeed I fancied that I could hear Gandy breathing nigh the door.

Orme, rubbing his wounds, groaned naturally—well might he groan, if he ached and burned as I. And 'Lord,' says he aloud, 'I'm black and blue! Were you ever flogged so, Jim?'

'I've not a shred of skin upon my back,' I answered, following his cue. 'I tell you, Rob, I'll try no more to leave the house!'

At that it seemed the breathing ceased, and presently the stair creaked as if he stole away.

'Jim,' whispered Rob, 'I said the walls are hollow! Lord knows who built this place! But whosoever he was, he planned to have the way of escape by sea, as by land. The floor rings under your feet, as if there were a hollow space below it . . . You've marked it?'

'Yes—as you told me!'

'Jim, when I was locked here a month since—like this—I took to searching in the room. There's something that the four-poster hides. Wait—while I am at the door look beneath it! Quick! Don't stay!' And stealing to the door, leant against it, listening intently. Nodding presently and whispering 'Now!'

At once I stooped forward, and pulling up the dusty hangings, so that the light from the window was upon the floor, I peered beneath the bed. Awhile I could see nothing save the flooring boards—they were stained black with age—but presently I made out, cut in a square, though filled with dust, the outline it seemed to me of a trap-door. Orme whispering 'Don't stay!' I let the covering drop, and drew back to the window, where he rejoined me.

'A door—going down whither?' I asked. 'D'ye guess?'

'No! I'd planned to prise it up and see! Gandy and Keziah have never noticed it—under the bed. It must have stood there for years! If there's no other way, Jim, and they're like to watch us night and day, we'll have the boards up some night and look for

ourselves. We can raise it with a chisel. What d'ye think, Jim?'

I nodded, sick still for the thought of what must have passed on the cliff above us, and of the crime that had brought the crew of *The Virginian* from America to their death under the cliffs. And understanding that Rob and I were at the mercy of such men. And savagely resentful for the cruel flogging Gandy had bestowed upon the pair of us.

'If we can get away,' whispered Orme, 'we'll make for Corbe—the Manor. In the village Gandy will have friends. They're surely battenning, the men of Corbe, on plunder from the wreck this morn. Aye, and they shared in the plot that wrecked the ship. Smugglers one and all—wreckers!'

'To the Manor,' I muttered. 'Yes, I'd like to get there. And see the widowed lady! Though, Rob, I fear the fellow John Corbe would prove no friend of mine. From his demeanour the morning at *The Gold Scales*!'

'Anywhere! So we're out of this house! But, Jim, for God's sake while we're here, show nothing! Don't let Gandy suspect—what we know! Remembering——'

So, whispering secretly by the window, or if we fancied Gandy or his creatures might be listening without our door, loudly bemoaning our stripes, the pair of us passed the morning. At noon Keziah, grimly triumphant, released us to our dinner. And thence we were directed by her to the schoolroom, where suave and smiling Mr. Gandy awaited us. And I do as-

sure you that no ordinary preceptor could have held us more to our tasks the weary afternoon through, or laboured more with us in stumbling through the *Commentaries* of Cæsar. I marvelled at the man—this power of concentrating his mind, assuredly troubled with the grim doings of the wreck, for the time upon our tuition; nor could I determine whether in his long life of sinfulness he had grown callous, so that it accounted nothing to him men should die, or whether with the dual nature that was his, he took a lively pleasure in the task of schoolmaster. Certainly none could have seemed more kindly, and none could have expounded with such clarity even to my dull senses on that day the obscurities of Cæsar's *Commentaries*.

FOR a week thence Mr. Gandy scarcely suffered us out of his sight. From morn till eve we were at our tasks, labouring under his surveillance in the schoolroom, or if we were free to walk abroad, we were compelled under pain of his displeasure—and our backs yet sore we durst not risk a fresh flogging—to remain within the stone wall that cut off the pastures about the Black House from the approach to the cliffs. And strolling aimlessly about the meadow, or sitting on the rocks in the autumn sunshine, we had a sense always that we were watched—either by Gandy himself from the terrace, or by the sullen, taciturn Ben, smoking his pipe on the steps leading down from the Black House. Keziah, who had seemed tolerant of us till our escapade, was now openly confessed our enemy. At our meals in the kitchen she presided with an aspect like to sour the milk in our porridge. Once when Rob Orme plucked up heart to rally her, rounding upon him, she told him that if he harried her, she'd go to Mr. Gandy himself, and that he'd suffer for it. Not alone the bruises of

our flogging weighed us down. I was tormented by the recollection of that dread night of tempest, of the evil lights that had done their murderous work from the cliffs—most of the encounter between Mr. Gandy and the stranger on the following morning—I scarce dared picture what had passed between them.

Mr. Gandy, from the moment of his discovery of us under the rock, viewed us, I saw, with black suspicion. Lifting my eyes from my book in the schoolroom, I chanced many times to catch his eyes, regarding us furtively and cruelly. I tell you the very devil looked from those blue eyes of his—evil blue eyes like jewels, lighting his dark, sinister face. And, sitting by the fire of a night, we dared not speak our thoughts—of the work on the cliff that morn—having a dread always lest he should hear. We spoke only of our terrors—of what should chance to us—when we were in the open pastures, or whispering abed in the great black four-poster of a night. Often I would hear the stairs creak, and I would clutch Rob Orme to hush even the whisper, and together we would lie, purporting to be sound asleep while the door would open stealthily, and candlelight flash upon our faces, and Gandy, grim and evil, stand peering down upon us. Once, indeed, for my terror I could not endure, and opening my eyes sat up with a start, only to find him smiling benignly upon me, and to hear him in that silver tone of his say, ‘Sleep, lad,—sleep. I did but

come in, ere I sought my bed, to be assured you were asleep, and not wasting the night in mischief.' And that cruel hand of his rested lightly upon my head, whereat I could scarcely repress a shudder. On the Sunday came the supreme mockery of prayers, a chapter, and a most pious exposition and exhortation by our preceptor, the pair of us ranged miserably before him in the study, and the bird,—to preserve the solemnity of the service—moved out on its perch into the sunshine near the door. We passed the remainder of the morn in the schoolroom, having exchanged our Greek and Latin books for tomes in which the writings of some dull old divine lay entombed—and might well have laid entombed till judgment day. So for the afternoon—with an hour's pacing of the meadow—and for the night locked early in our bedchamber.

Now all these days we saw no sign nor heard aught of the wreck and its hapless company. On the second Sabbath from my coming to the Black House Mr. Gandy rode abroad on his black mare. But though he was out of the house, so dire had been his threats before he set off, wrapped in his black cloak, and so close the watch the seaman Ben kept upon us, that we dared not seek the cliffs. And from our windows we saw naught, save the white-winged ships going out to sea in the pale sunlight, and a little schooner which in the fair weather succeeding the storm seemed to hover about Corbe the day through.

Whispering in our bed that Sabbath night, we feigned sleep, when Gandy came stealing up the stairs, and when the door was locked once more upon us composed ourselves to slumber. But I slept ill, and I woke repeatedly to lie listening to the drums of the sea that beat through the dark, and a little wind moaning about the Black House. And once I started up, and clutching at Rob Orme roused him, believing that I caught the sound of voices muttering—it seemed below us. And when he grunted sleepily, ‘What’s the matter, Jim?’ I whispered to him, ‘Rob, d’ye hear aught? I fancied—Listen!’

Voices! Assuredly I heard voices, seeming to come up through the floor. And recalling the old trap-door that lay beneath the bed, whispered to him, ‘Rob, d’ye hear? D’ye hear! Below us.’

Awhile he sat silent as if he strained his ears to hear. He whispered at last, ‘I hear—something. Voices. Or the sea! Below—under the floor! Yes!’

‘Rob, is it Gandy? Ben?’

‘Many voices. And a sound like the sea—or thunder.’ Then suddenly, ‘Jim—I believe,—they’re rolling something over stone. Like casks. That’s it, Jim—casks—brandy from France, or hogsheads from the wreck. Jim, there’s a cellar below us, or a cave. That’s it! Smugglers!’

And straining my ears while excitedly we clung together, I heard the rolling of barrels as in a great echoing cave. And I understood

that beneath the Black House the smugglers of Corbe, at whom my guardian had hinted to the landlord of *The Gold Scales*, had their storehouse. For it might have been a half-hour the sounds continued to my terror, and then died away, till only the moaning of the wind and the beating of the sea drums reached my ears. Rob, slipping suddenly from my side, stole to the window, and peered out into the blackness. Diving back as suddenly, and pulling me down beside him in the bed, for I knew well what cause. And while we lay feigning sleep, the pair of us, I had a sense that the door opened stealthily; that some one stole to the bed, plucked back the curtains, and playing the candlelight over our faces, peered down upon us. Gandy! And with the thought of the sounds below, I understood why he remained longer than was his wont, scrutinizing us to be assured that we slept. But at last he let the curtain fall, and stole away as silently as he had come. And presently Rob Orme was whispering in my ears.

‘Jim, I caught the flash of a light at sea. Maybe the schooner that’s been off the coast these days? Maybe!’ And again, ‘Jim, I’m going to find out what’s under that trap-door. I am.’

‘Gandy will kill us for it—flog the hide off us,’ muttered I. ‘Let’s leave it alone.’

‘Not I! I’ll have that door up to-morrow night. I will! Smugglers—maybe, they’re no friends of Gandy’s. And, Jim, if they’ll help us away—from him—no matter what

they do, won't it be better than lying here, at his will! Fearing what he'll do to us. After what he did—to that poor fellow on the cliff!'

NOW ere this Rob Orme had shown no sign to me that his spirit faltered beneath the burden of our life at the Black House, and our dread of Gandy. I had faltered many times, believing that one who had destroyed a hapless fellow creature, by stabbing him or by flinging him back from the cliffs, would not spare us, if he believed that we knew what had passed, and that our knowledge meant danger to him. I do not know from the loneliness and suffering of my boyhood I set so great a price on life. I only know that life is more precious to me at this time, having so much more love and fellowship, which account more to a man than great possessions. But the thought of the unhappy company upon *The Virginian* perishing in the waters, so that the wreckers might possess themselves of the ship's freight; the cry that had gone up to heaven through the storm; the murder done upon the cliffs that morn, the evil eyes that watched us day and night, turned all my thoughts—my purpose—to be away from the Black House, it mattered not whither else in the world.

Now all the day after we had heard the voices and the sounds like the rolling of hogsheads over the stones Rob Orme made no further mention of his intent to prise up the old trap-door that seemed to be beneath our bed. Monotonously as any other day of our gaoling in the Black House the day dragged through—our studies in the schoolroom, our meals served by the taciturn Keziah—the evil-eyed Ben watching us, as we sat in the feeble sunlight down in the meadow. But looking seawards I perceived—and muttered Rob to look—the sails of a schooner making out to sea from Corbe—maybe the smugglers' schooner—the smugglers whose voices we had heard coming up from beneath the Black House. By a singular piece of fortune Mr. Gandy elected that afternoon to ride again to Corbe. Booted and spurred and cased in a dark riding coat, he came into the schoolroom, finding time, ere he left us, to set us tasks that should keep us at our books, till we were ordered abed, and fingering his lean riding switch suggestively as he bade us set ourselves to our studies,—or we'd pay our reckoning so sure as the sun rose on the morrow's morn. And patting us benevolently upon the heads—I shuddered under his fingers—he left us.

Darkness brought Keziah with our supper—the pair of us sitting glumly over the fire—and scarce had we emptied the platters when she was back, briefly ordering us to bed. Submissively we made our way up to our room, where instantly she turned the key upon us,

and scurried downstairs—glad, no doubt, to be quit of the ward of us for the night. And Rob Orme was muttering instantly into my ears, ‘Jim, now for the trap-door! I’ve a knife, I stole it from the kitchen this morning. Listen at the door, Jim, while I try to raise the trap.’

From the door I saw him toss up the hangings from the bed, and crawl beneath it, groping for the crack in the boards; and presently heard his scraping with the blade to test it. Suddenly he wriggled out, and whispering, ‘I believe it’s easy, Jim! Help me move the bed,—quiet, lad—quiet!’

I think the knowledge that Gandy was abroad—that Keziah had scarcely returned to her kitchen—had made us more daring than at any time since our misadventure on the cliffs. I left the doorway—Rob was already striving with all his force to shift the great oaken bed from the spot whence it had stood Lord knows how many years, ere Gandy had been master of the Black House—and setting my shoulder against a post, I strove with him. But for all our efforts the bed was set firm, and would not move an inch; later I understood that it was well, for assuredly had we pushed it across the floor it must have revealed the movement to Gandy and his servants.

‘No use!’ cries Rob at last, gasping for his efforts. ‘No use trying. Hold up the hangings, Jim, and show the light.’

Diving beneath the bed again while I snatched

up the candle, he prised at the cracks about the boards with the long carving knife he had purloined. And suddenly there came a cracking sound, and a blast of foul air nigh put out the light. Gasping, he drew out from beneath the bed, and making for the window, flung it open, so that the sea air might blow in upon us.

‘What is it, Rob?’ cried I. ‘What’s happened?’

‘I touched a spring, I think,’ gasped he. ‘Foul air—nigh poisoned me! Faugh! The door’s lifted. Stay here—awhile—till the air’s sweet. Wait, Jim!’

Trembling with excitement we leaned against the open window. The candlelight revealed a grey dust coming up. A musty smell—a reek like rotting weed—awhile the candle flickered, and burnt blue, till at its clearing we understood that it was safe for us to look again beneath the bed.

Now Rob Orme’s knife assuredly had touched a secret spring, and the trap had risen from the floor, until it met the bed. And we looked into a black depth, which we dared presently approach, and crawling on our bellies—I bearing the candle—to peer down. The chill draught coming from the vault nigh put the candle out, so that I must needs protect its light with my fingers. Had Gandy come upon us then he must have found the pair of us in a fit and proper position for condign punishment,—our heads beneath the bed, and peering down into the pit. Ay, and marking going down into the darkness, whither the candlelight

might not penetrate, an iron ladder,—rung by rung. But the foul air came up in a draught, sickened us, and put out the candlelight. Shuddering I drew back with Rob Orme in the darkness. And even as Rob's knife had touched some secret spring, so that the trap-door had risen, in our movements back we touched the spring once more, for as we rose to our feet, and staggered to the window, now lit by the white moon, we heard the trap-door drop slowly to its fitting in the floor.

WE dared no further follow our adventure for the night. We had neither flint nor steel to relight our candle. By happy chance the moon riding full in the heavens, was a lamp for us, and enabled us to readjust the hangings, sweep under the bed the dust which had risen with the trap, and, stripping, don our nightshirts and get to bed. The knife Rob secreted beneath the mattress. Whispering lest Gandy or his servants should have crept up the stairs to spy upon us, we fell to wild conjecturing whither the iron stair should bring us—resolved further to pursue the adventure, and going down the ladder on the next night, learn whither it should bring us.

‘And if it breaks our necks’—thus Rob Orme—‘what matter, Jim? What’s to be the end of us at Gandy’s hands?’

‘Why not to-night, then?’

‘Nay, lad—not to-night. We must have light—and ’twill be well to have food. To-morrow, I’ll have both. To-morrow night, Jim.’

And clutching at my arm broke off—for the stairs creaked dismally. Yet, while we feigned

sleep, no one came. Our excitement at the discovery, our apprehension lest Gandy should hit upon the trap-door through the dust that it had raised, our conjecturing whither the stair should lead, by whom and how long since the ladder had been set there, kept us awake whispering for hours. All this while we heard no sound of Gandy's return—no one crept up the stairs, though once when Rob Orme had dropped off to sleep I thought that I heard mutterings at the foot of the stairs, from the house, as if Keziah and old Ben held conclave there. But even this I doubted, it might well have been some draught come leaking in, for the sea wind blew without in fitful gusts, and moaned about the Black House as if the spirits of the seamen drowned from *The Virginian* menaced its master and his man. At last I slept—slept till the day was clear—and Keziah, sour and shivering from the morning's chill—stood glowering down on us.

'Would ye sleep all day?' snaps she. 'Your porridge will go cold, if you're not downstairs this minute. Up with ye! Lazy dogs!'

Whisking out of the room and muttering sourly to herself, as she climbed down the stairs, 'Lazy dogs!' and yet 'Lazy dogs!'

'She's in a sweet temper this morn, Jim,' says Rob, tumbling out of bed, and slipping off his nightshirt, to wash his body for all the cold.

'I wonder can she have seen aught?' said I. 'Her eyes are as keen as needles.'

'Except when it's a matter of sweeping under our bed,' he answered, laughing through the

splash of soapy water. 'She's a sad slut is our Keziah. But, after all, it's for our own good. I'm not complaining!'

'Rob, when d'ye think we can try?'

'To-night,' he answered. 'Maybe to-night. It depends on Gandy.'

It was our fortune that Mr. Gandy, returning towards midday, brought with him a guest for the Black House. They came upon us, Gandy and his friend, as Rob and I had left the kitchen from our dinner, and were making down into the meadow. They were yet in riding dress—the pair of them—Gandy in his black coat and boots, the gentleman in as fine a dress as on the morning when he had come suddenly upon my guardian and me in the kitchen of *The Gold Scales*. 'Twas John Corbe, handsome and black, but when his eyes fell on me, as I would have slipped by him, he waved his riding switch, and ordered, 'Come here, boy! Your pardon, Gandy.'

I stood before the pair of them, while Rob went slowly down into the meadow. My preceptor's smile was beneficent and bland as he regarded me. Mr. Corbe's face—while I believed that in his eyes was the same expression of hate for me, as I had noted at *The Gold Scales*—was impassive. A handsome face—a young face still, and wholesome of colouring, save for the flush of wine upon it, save for the weary lines about the mouth, and the dull marks below his fine eyes. His hand, clutching his whip, was delicate as a woman's and beringed; he had a jewel in his cravat,

else his modishness was expressed in the cut of his riding-coat, and his creaseless riding-breeches showing off his legs.

‘My beloved pupil,’ said Mr. Gandy placidly, ‘young James Thorne.’

‘I saw the fellow with the attorney, Pounds, at *The Gold Scales*,’ said the gentleman indifferently. ‘Pounds declared him a rogue—d’ye find him so?’

‘A most docile scholar,’ purred Gandy. ‘Having the ardent spirit of youth, though a whit intractable.’

‘In other words, he’s already felt your cane,’ John Corbe took him up, laughing.

‘I have found occasion to correct him,’ admitted Mr. Gandy. ‘The lesson was not lost on him. He’ll not so offend again. It pained me; it pained him. Did it not, James?’

‘I can answer for myself, sir,’ I muttered—whereat Gandy’s laughter showed his pleasure.

This while John Corbe was watching me, as if he studied my look and bearing; and as I met his eyes, I saw the malevolent light in them, the hate which grew upon his face—darkening it, as a cloud darkens the surface of the sea. His expression, as silently he regarded me, was not lost on Mr. Gandy. It seemed to breed in him malicious pleasure, for in that silver voice of his, he said, as if he chanced on a discovery, ‘Had I not received from my worthy friend Mr. Pounds particulars of this lad’s parentage, Mr. Corbe—I’d be conjecturing his relationship to you.’

‘To me!’ cried John Corbe angrily. ‘I thank you, Gandy.’

‘Nay, not in any particular spirit of compliment. The lad’s a fine lad, Corbe; he’s such a lad as you may well have been twenty and odd years since. Of a like build—of a similar countenance. His hair’s black as yours; he has your colouring, your eyes——’

‘Cease this folly,’ snarled the gentleman, turning abruptly from me, and moving apart to the balustrade, where he stood angrily tapping the stone with his whip.

‘Folly, aye, ’tis folly!’ says Gandy, as if sobered. ‘This lad’s lot in life is not the happy lot of Mr. Corbe. Forgive me, John—forgive me. I did but jest. My pupil, sir, appreciates your kindly interest in him. That will do, James, you may go!’

And glad enough to be away from the pair of them, I bowed clumsily, and scurried off to Rob, waiting me in the meadow. As we walked away, Gandy and his companion passed into the house.

‘What did the fellow want with you, Jim?’ cries Rob.

‘Want! I don’t know! He only asked of Gandy whether he’d yet flogged me, since he’d seen me with Pounds in *The Gold Scales*. That was all.’

‘Jim, what’s between him and Pounds? D’ye know you’re as like him as two peas. Hair and colour——’

‘Gandy was saying so,’ I answered. ‘Corbe seemed to take it ill. What’s he doing here?’

Have you ever set eyes on him before, Rob? ' For I had in my mind the thought of the malevolent look in John Corbe's eyes, and a certain uneasy feeling that his visit to the Black House boded me no good.

' Oh, yes !—I've seen him here—maybe thrice before. Most like he turns a penny from Gandy's trade—smuggling. Most like the French brandy and laces mean guineas in his pocket and that fine coat on his back. And, maybe, Jim '—casting a look about him and lowering his voice, lest Ben be hovering near—' he's not above taking his share of the cargo from *The Virginian*. An ill-looking fowl, Jim, for all his fine feathers.'

' Aye—ill-looking.' Feeling, indeed, a hate of the gentleman with his arrogance and the cruelty of his lips and eyes, and some instinct that seemed to warn me against him—that spoke to mind and thought. And I knew that I hated John Corbe as he hated me.

We saw no more of the gentlemen that afternoon. We spent the few hours, ere the November darkness fell, in the schoolroom, shivering for the cold of the fireless room and for the excitement that yet possessed us at the recollection of our discovery of the trap-door, and the ladder going down into blackness. Little we took from our books that afternoon—it was well that Gandy, mellow from wine and beneficent, looked in upon us once only, and finding us to all appearance studious, muttered a platitude, and left us. No fire was lit for us in the schoolroom that eve ; from our supper

served to us in the kitchen sullen old Ben piloted us straightway to bed, locking the door upon us, and stumping down the stairs. It suited our purpose well, for we proposed that night to risk the chance of Gandy's discovering us, and to examine further the mystery below the trap-door. Now it chanced that Keziah had set a fresh candle in the stick that day; and furthermore Rob had succeeded in secreting flint and steel about himself, with the knife which he had not dared leave hidden in the bed, so that we should have light enough for our purpose. And, scarce had the sound of Ben's footsteps died away, than Rob had stuck the chair-back beneath the handle of the door, to hold it, and was probing with the knife for the secret spring. Again the blade found it, again the door shot up, and the reek as of bilge water stank in our nostrils. And as the air cleared, we were peering, the pair of us, down into the depths whither the ladder descended. From the gulf sounded up a hollow bellowing as if the sea broke into the mouth of a cave, but we heard no sound of voices, or rolling as if barrels were shifted.

And 'Jim,' whispers Rob, 'I'm going to find out what's down there. Hold the light for me, I'm going down!'

'Not alone! I'm coming after.'

'No, you'll stay here!'

'And meet Gandy alone! Not I. If you go, I come after. I'll not stay here——'

'But the light! The draught will blow the

candle out.- We'll never find our way back in the dark. Hold the light !'

Slipping from me while my heart was in my mouth for what might chance to him down in that black, foul pit, he caught the edge of the floor, and lowered himself cautiously on to the ladder. Slowly rung by rung he descended—the darkness swallowed him up, and I was left alone—shaking for terror lest he go to his death—careless of aught that might chance if Gandy should come upon us—and for all my terror drawn by my curiosity to follow him down into the depths. None the less, shadowing the candle with my hand, I held the light out over the pit, to illumine for him his descent by the rusted ladder. And presently his voice, choked and muffled, mounted up to me. ' Jim—if you can—come down—with the light !'

I NEEDED no further invitation to essay the stair. I drew from beneath the bed to load my pockets with flint and steel and tinder-box. An instant I listened at the door, but heard no stir from Gandy or his folks. With the candlestick then clenched in my left hand, I struggled under the bed, and gripping the edge of the floor with my right hand, I commenced slowly to descend. Rung by rung I went down—by some chance saving the light from extinction—rung by rung, there must have been a hundred of the steps or more. The red rust rasped my hand. The chill air was as the chill of a tomb. A reek of salt was in my nostrils; and the blackness of the pit was about me and the flickering candle flame. At length I felt Rob's hand grip my jacket, and my feet trod upon stone. Whispering 'There's another ladder going down, I think, and the sea's below us,' he took the candle from me, and guarding its feeble light with his fingers, sought to reveal where we stood. So far as the palely burning flame revealed, we stood in a stone chamber—on a level it should be with the ground floor of the Black House.

Sand and dust were beneath our feet—as Rob lowered the candle I could make out the mummified bodies of sea-fowl scattered on the floor. The floor through the litter showed that it was the original rock cut roughly with pick and chisel, ere the Black House was built ; at about six feet from the foot of the iron stair, which was set in masonry, a second pit yawned black and, when we drew nigh it fearfully, we saw indeed a second ladder going down even as the first descended from the room above us. At brief intervals there arose from this pit a rumbling sound as of the water beating into the mouth of a cave—the sound that we had heard dully when we lay abed. From the platform of rock whereon we stood a gallery, we found presently, led away almost at right angles to the gulf, and along this we commenced presently to trace our way, possessed now solely by the spirit of adventure and heedless of Mr. Gandy's vengeance, if he or his servants should find our room untenanted. Indeed, I did suggest to Rob that it might be well to quit our search for the night and get back to bed, but he answered only, 'I'm going to find whither this way will bring us, Jim ; it may be a way out of the Black House. We may be free this night, ere Gandy knows. Come on, lad.'

And at that—hope surging in my heart—I followed him without further protest. So step by step—going cautiously lest we pitch down into some pit—with the candlelight giving us but the merest glimmer wherewith to trace

our way, we stole along the gallery. It was black and damp and chill as the grave ; cut through the natural rock, but arched over with masonry, this much we could make out, when Rob, lifting the candle high, revealed the low roof. Advancing slowly we came at last to a narrow flight of stone stairs leading up. And now, so far as I might conjecture, we were beneath the floors of the wing of the Black House wherein Gandy dwelt ; for as we climbed the stairway—it was thick with dust—I made out above our heads great beams of timber—flooring—black, cobwebbed, dusty. Aye, and the rats were around us, scurrying, squeaking, leaping from before us, as we climbed the stair—it had twelve steps—and I marked with a shudder the pin-point lights of their eyes. Lord, how they scurried, and squeaked, and fled from us !

Muttering ‘ Go quiet now, Gandy may hear, Rob paused upon the topmost step. ’Twas nigh on a level with the floor ; the space, narrowing, formed as it were a cupboard—stone for the wall of the house, oak for the panelling of the room. Gandy’s room,—we were behind the panels in Gandy’s room—aye, and the sudden sound of voices—his voice, John Corbe’s—made me grip Rob’s arm, and whisper ‘ Quiet ! Put out the light. We’re in his room.’

Rob, sheltering the light with his jacket, stood silent with me, both leaning forward, straining our ears—nigh the panels—to hear, if we might, what passed between our master

and the precious gentleman, John Corbe.

And the voices came to us clearly—so nigh were we behind the oak panelling. And furthermore, though we had stepped quietly on our stockinged feet, through a layer of soft dust, it seemed the gentlemen had heard us stirring. For, said he, 'It's time you set your traps for rats, Gandy. The place is haunted with them. Hear them behind the panels there!'

'They trouble me no more than ghosts,' came our preceptor's silver tone. 'You're nervous, Corbe.'

'If I didn't know you so well, Gandy,' snapped the gentleman, 'I'd wonder how you, of all men, could endure this house. You should hear a ghost in every wind in the chimney, and picture a gibbet from every creaking shutter.'

'I'm not plagued with superstitious terrors, Mr. Corbe,' Gandy assured him. 'I'm not imaginative. I have nothing upon my conscience.'

'Or conscience to have anything upon.'

'Put it so, if you will. Superstition is merely a sign of age. Were I you, Mr. Corbe, I should consult my physician. The pleasures of the Town are breaking you before your time. I mark it in your haggard eye and shaking hand. It would be well for you, John Corbe, were you wedded to—to a very charming kinswoman not so many miles off, and settled securely in Corbe.'

Whereat Mr. Corbe cursed very savagely.

'Now I,' said Mr. Gandy, 'am advanced in years. I am turned three score and ten, and

still a very infant to my macaw there upon his perch. Yet I anticipate—having from my youth up been master of my mind—another ten years of life. I live peaceably ; I sleep soundly. I shall sleep as soundly under the sod or under the sea, as destiny will.'

'Would you turn seaman again ? '

'Why d'ye ask that ? '

'“ Under the sea ! ” '

'Who knows ? I tell you, Corbe, at times I sicken of my life ashore. I am not old enough yet in mind to wish to spend my days always in this place. The sea calls to me ; adventure calls, fortune calls.'

'Fortune ! '

'Corbe, were I as you, having so much yet not enough—Aye, aye,——' breaking off suddenly from his theme, 'Let me fill your glass ! ' Bottle and glass clinked ere he spoke again. 'Corbe, ye need guineas, having spent your patrimony, and being debarred from setting your fingers on the guineas in the coffers of Mistress Anne Corbe. Guineas that came from gold and ivory and spices—silks—trade of John Company ! And as the Indies enriched John Corbe your grandsire, so might the Indies enrich John Corbe his grandson.'

'You'd have me turn merchant—oh, the devil,' and the gentleman's voice was thick with the fine wine of the Black House cellars.

'I'd have you turn treasure-seeker.'

'Lord, I seek it night on night at Watier's. And lose—and lose. I seek it of Anne Corbe, my kinswoman. I seek—and never find ! '

'Ere the Englishman, ere the French, ere the Dutch, the Spaniard, sought the riches of Ind—I tell you, Corbe, that even from Peru—in those years when Spain fattened on the gold of the Americas—the galleons went sailing the Pacific seeking ever their Eldorado. De Quiros—De Torres—others!'

'Oh, curse it, Gandy, if you're leading up to aught—out with it, man!'

'Have patience, Corbe! Fill your glass with that golden wine. I'd fill your mind—with a like golden wine.'

'You'd have me drunken'—but the bottle clinked on glass for all his growling protest.

'Corbe, the Portugee and Dutchmen touched the isles—north of New Holland—New South Wales—whither His Majesty's undutiful subjects go at the King's bounty. In these isles—north—aye, and down the great reefs that line the Eastern coast—in these isles——'

'Curse the isles!' muttered Mr. Corbe thickly.

'Argosies were lost! Argosies of Peru. Argosies of Ind. And these argosies of Ind—Dutchmen—bore a precious freight of gold and ivory and gems, spices and silks. Aye, and with these eyes I picture—what another saw twenty odd years ago—just such an argosy, gold and gems that the Spaniards or the Dutchmen had stolen, or maybe, traded from the treasure house of some Indian king.'

No word from Mr. Corbe now; I took it he listened intent as we.

'Corbe, you talk of your kinswoman's East

India stock, wasting while she mourns her man—and her child. I'd picture to you, Corbe, this argosy, broken upon a reef, and this reef now high and dry in the sand dunes? And in her holds yet a treasure of gold and jewels,—though spices and silks be long since blown to dust, dust with the dust of the dead who trod her deck. And all this treasure, Corbe, there waiting for some ship, for men who live and may yet enjoy all that the gold and the gems—dross in themselves—may buy. What of it, Corbe, what of it?'

'Gandy, either you're most damnably drunk——'

'Corbe—I'll tell the tale as it was told me. A fellow escaping north in a little boat—escaping from the harsh rule of his taskmasters at Botany Bay and driving north. Living after his two companions die of thirst—and this fellow striking the isle of the argosy, landing there for water. D'ye mark your man, Corbe?—a starveling wretch burned black with the sun, eyes thick with salt, lips raw and the fever of thirst consuming him. Landing in a little bay—beaching his boat there, and straying inland through the sand dunes. . . .

'I tell you, Corbe, the sand dunes were about him—yellow as glass, smeared with the green of rushes . . . no trees, no shade. Wandering miles up and down the coast—and the sun above him, a white fiery sun in a sky of blue glass . . . And this argosy looming up before him—going high to a turret—masts and spars tumbled over the side, deep into the sand.

The ship broken on an ironstone fang, red as blood. A red reef—sand all about it where once the sea had washed. Shade—the fellow, as he narrated this to me in Limehouse, had no care save for shade and water. Shade—shade only under the hull of the ship broken on the ironstone fang. As he came under the hull, the shade seemed to flow out to him like cool water—like green water, blue water on yellow sand.

‘He lay prone in the shade. Thirst burned him. Fever shaped fantastic images in his brain. A rope, he said, seemed to hang down from the wreck astern—he saw it clear—swaying in the wind. Figures slid down the rope—like apes, dropped noiseless in the sand beside him, hemmed him in—a circle of fantastic shapes, rigged in fantastic clothes. All flickered away. New shapes raced with the fever through his brain. Thus his story, Corbe !

‘When he awoke the sun had dropped to the west. The smart of his lids as he rubbed them with briny hands blinded him. Vision clearing, he lay in the sand staring up at the stern of the broken ship, rotting timbers, a dulling scroll of beaten metal, no rope, no shapes stirring. His thirst burned him as a draught of corrosive acid ; yet for the cool from the salt wind and the shade his brain was clearer. Water—only water. The broken galleon concerned him in no way. Thought of recapture troubled him not at all. He pulled himself up painfully by a broken spar, and staggered

about the base of the wreck. Moaning afar—sea and wind—rolling clouds, illumined suddenly by a shaft of white fire. Thunder above the roar of surf and scream of winds, white sea-fowl beating up shrilling. The storm broke. His waiting had seemed an eternity. Fat drops of rain—he sought to catch them in his hands, his tongue stuck out for them. He tore the rag of shirt from his flesh; loosed the buckle of his belt, and stripped to the waist caught the wash of rain upon his body. Stark then, his breeches falling from his legs—the hailstones beating on him—his hands cupping to catch the rain—sucking the liquid up—cupping his hands again, and again sucking the water. Brain clearing, blood cooling—having the thought to catch the streams of water down from the broken galleon. Drinking and drinking, his thirst yet unquenched; and the chill of the storm upon his body. Shaking suddenly as with an ague—sheltering under the galleon side—thinking him of his rags drenched on the sand.

‘So the storm passed. The blackness left the heavens. And the sun lay rose-coloured on a purple cloud. The great hull above him purple—the brass scroll burning dully as gold. Only a sweet breeze blowing up from the sea—and the air of the evening beneficent. The ague was upon him. His rags were drenched, and stiff from wet salt. His chafed flesh could not endure them. He scooped a sodden handful of biscuit from his breeches pocket, and slinging the garments over the fallen mast, swallowed

the biscuit down. For all the chill upon him, his strength flowed back into his body. He had a notion now to climb up into the wreck—piled up how long since in this desert of sand, all this way from the sea? From the shattered turret he might look out over the sands;—to what lay about him on the mainland—bush where there should be water; seawards lest they come after. North lay China; south Hell. Many miles south—he had sailed; how many days in the stolen boat beached at dawn? Before he started his tramp into the sand hills, miles into the sand hills, though he had had a sense of circling about and about, seeking water?

‘Naked he climbed up by the fallen mast. A splinter tore his breast, as he climbed. Easily he climbed, dropping soon over the side on to the rotten deck. A bed of sand had blown up to case the deck; it was splashed with the sea-fowl, gummed with scales, and reeking with the dead fish the birds had borne there. Where the deck was bare from sand, the planking parted; great cavities appeared. He stared ahead; he saw that he was upon an island—the red fang, the sand dunes, mangroves, dull green scrub; turning he saw the sea it might be a half mile back—purple sea from blood-red!

‘Corbe, this fellow stepped upon the deck. On the instant the rotten planks cracked under him, and he fell into the ship’s hold. He told me that he lay stunned all night; and the next morn his blood was like a mask upon his face.

He lay propped upon a brass-bound chest ; and the litter of fallen wood formed a pit wherein he was held. Now on this chest lay a skeleton—the bones rotted into the wood, the teeth and the skull seeming to bite into the very chest—the shred of a skeleton with the garments long since blown away.

‘And, Corbe, this fellow, smashing in the chest with a broken beam, looked on a great and glittering treasure. There was a rosary, and every bead was a pink pearl. And the cross was of yellow gold, and the Christ upon it was carven in fine ivory, and the blood of the wounds were red gems—rubies. There were great dishes of gold and silver chased with the figures of men and girls and strange monsters and wonderful flowers. There were goblets of fine glass or crystal—rose-red, green glass and blue ; the stems of the goblets were of gold and shaped as fishes or as scaly serpents and dragons ; a rusty dagger with the haft made precious by its crust of sea-green emeralds. There was much else, and all this rare stuff was packed in with thin shrivelled leather—little bags—one bursting as he lifted it and the gold coins all jingling as they fell.

‘Corbe, the fellow took no more from this treasure chest on the treasure ship than the rosary and a handful of gems and a pocket of gold. And finding water near he sailed again, dreading to stay to take more, or to burden his boat, lest the King’s men capture him, and he swing for it. He was picked up on the high seas by a Dutch ship when he was nigh dying

of thirst and mad with fever. Yet reaching Amsterdam he sneaked to London, finding me there, who had known him ere he fell into dissolute ways.'

And suddenly, with a compelling voice, strident and clear, 'Corbe, I tell you I am sick to death of the monkish life I lead. I am not old enough to be virtuous. I cannot sit me down to die. I cannot make my peace with heaven yet. I have not profited enough from sinning to make my bargain with God for my sins. . . . I tell you that in my possession, ready to hand, I have this fellow's chart, mapped on a shred of rag—a fish bone for pen and his blood for ink. Corbe, if you'd be rich, you shall share your fill. Dig into Mistress Anne's coffers—find the money as you will—charter our ship and we'll be sailing. Corbe, the sea calls to me again. I go, ere I sin ashore beyond redemption. Or die without a sin worth the sinning. Think of this treasure, Corbe !'

'Are you lying, Gandy ?'

'Why should I lie to you? What have I to gain? Put it so. But I am poor, and must take the pay of such as Pounds to play school-master, gaoler—what you will. A ship, Corbe, and a search for this isle and its argosy, wrecked centuries since.

'And this, Corbe—this precious gewgaw in my hand is the rosary, with its rose-pink pearls, and its ivory Christ, and its red gems to mark His wounds!'

NOW, all this while we had listened intently behind the panel, Rob Orme and I, attentive of every word of our preceptor ; yet, if Rob were indeed of a like mind with me, imagining that Mr. Gandy was very drunk. About us the rats squeaked and scurried, their fierce little eyes peering out of the blackness. The candle, shaded by Rob's jacket, fluttering in the draught that came up from the cavern, was burning low. But, though I whispered in Rob's ear, ' Let's go back ! We'll be lost in the dark ! ' I was ready enough to linger and hear our pair of gentlemen out, when Rob showed no sign of stirring.

' The chart ; where's this chart ? ' Corbe was muttering, thickly.

' The chart is in my keeping. I am not so foolish, Mr. Corbe, as to let it pass into your hands without some surety. Find your ship—your crew—Corbe men for choice, and myself for your master ; and the chart is yours—as mine.'

' You're not seeking to bargain with me, Gandy ? '—Mr. Corbe's voice was drunken and menacing—' Let's have this chart ! '

‘In good time, Corbe.’

‘I ask to see it now! Where have you hid it? In that press there, with the Eastern work? In that chest?’

I believed that Mr. Gandy had slid between him and the black press with the lacquered work, as Mr. Corbe lurched to his feet.

‘So you have it there? Show it to me!’

‘Mr. Corbe, pray sit down! The wine’s by your hand.’

‘Not till I see the chart, or what you have hid in that mystery-box. Not till I see.’

‘Mr. Corbe, pray sit down!’

‘Damn it, Gandy, it’s for me to dictate!’

‘Not yet, Mr. Corbe, not yet!’

‘No? When a word of mine—Gandy, you’re forgetting, you’re surely forgetting—what you are! And a word of mine——’

‘And a word of yours, Mr. Corbe, might land me in Newgate.’

‘What’s it your accursed bird’s always shrieking? “Execution Dock!” A man who’s played pirate on the high seas! Who’s burnt the English ships that he’s looted——’

‘Mr. Simon Gandy, Master of Arts—preceptor—whom Mr. Corbe——. Finish my sentence!’—with sudden, strident wrath—‘Finish it for me! And what you’ve said this night—what you’ve asked me to do—offered me gold for!’

‘And what you’ll do—for the price I’ll pay?’

‘What I may or may not do. I tell you, Mr. Corbe, that looking on you now, hearing

you threaten me, remembering what the vulgar fellow Pounds said in this room—what he offered me—I'm minded—tempt me not too far—to set you and him by the heels! A gibbet in the shriek of the wind, said you! The wind shrieks, and the shutters creak, hear! Avert the omen. Fill your glass, Mr. Corbe, fill your glass!'

With black and drunken rage, John Corbe made answer. 'Gandy, don't threaten me! Who'd believe your word—against mine? A word from Pounds—who you are—and Pounds will speak the word when I'd have him speak—and the rope's twined for your neck!'

'And the rope's twined for your neck and his! And Mistress Anne Corbe has her wish! And Roger Corbe's son comes to his own. All this—all this—and only a word from me! Corbe, for what I was, for what I yet may be again, I offer no defence to man. Such as I am, such as I was, my Maker made me. But I tell you, Corbe, that I am weary to death of Pound's claim of a hold on me—claim of a hold from such as Pounds, claim of a hold from such as you! I tell you, Corbe, that I am weary to death. Pounds knows me,—Pounds has the past of me, recorded in that evil head of his. Pounds holds me—from the confession—death-bed confession—of the rogue for whose defence I paid—money spent to no end. Pounds has my story from that rogue turned off by Newgate! I said to you this night that the sea calls to me,—that I'd turn gentleman of fortune once again! Aye,

the sea calls, as the land calls—and my books, and the thought of a quiet fireside and the teaching of youth. There are two men in me—the scholar I was ; scholar I would have been—scholar I would be, save that the sea calls to the other man in me, save that my youth claws at me, draws me back——’

‘Gandy, what a palavering old dog you are !’

‘Have it so ! Pounds, when I would have turned schoolmaster in very truth ; been happy with my books and scholars, and put out of my mind what’s been. Pounds, your creature, Pounds, it is compels me——’

‘My creature, Pounds !’ spluttered John Corbe. ‘Egad ! Gandy, the old rogue would play a double game with me. This boy—to find him with this boy at Corbe—so near—when I had paid—year in, year out, I’d paid——, Gandy, are you in league with him ?’

‘Folly, John Corbe—mere folly !’

‘The boy once gone—— Oh, God ! had I but had the courage——’

‘The boy once dead, and you reigning at Corbe——’

‘The boy once dead, Gandy—— !’

‘Not I,’ said my preceptor. ‘I’ll have no part in it.’

‘And yet—and yet—a ship—goes to wreck,—*The Virginian*—Gandy. And you—and your folks—those lights upon the cliffs !’

‘I am no wrecker !’

‘Yet you wrecked—— !’

‘I am no wrecker ! Mark me, John Corbe—whatever—I have been——’

‘ You lie ! ’

‘ I am a schoolmaster,’ sneered Mr. Gandy, smoothly ; ‘ and may teach you manners. John Corbe, you’re drunken ! ’Tis a very potent wine ! I waste my time with you to-night. To bed, man, to bed ! You’ll have a sore head in the morning.’ His laughter mocked and menaced.

‘ Gandy—your argosy ! And the ship you’d have me charter ? How shall the ship be chartered—while Anne Corbe——’

I know not how it chanced, but the candle light, spluttering suddenly, scorched Rob Orme’s fingers. Aye,—and his curse—a man’s curse—rapped suddenly out on the air. And at John Corbe’s sudden exclamation, ‘ What’s that ? ’—the pair of us, as stricken with sudden panic, were scuttling through the dust and down the stair. Swiftly we fled, swiftly we reached the iron ladder to our room. And as we shot the trap back to its rest, the candle, dipping in the stick, burned out. Mr. Gandy, stepping stealthily up the stairs, and drawing the curtains to look down upon us, found the pair of us sleeping placidly. But though it seemed his fingers played nigh my face—my throat—I had no terror of him, recalling what had passed between him and my kinsman, John Corbe.

ON the following morning Mr. Corbe rode away from the Black House. As we made our way down to the kitchen for our breakfast, he stood booted and spurred upon the terrace, communing with our preceptor. Now, with the thought of the conversation of the night before fresh in my mind, I could not resist staring at him, as Rob and I were passing by at Keziah's heels—and though I sought to set my look so that it should reveal nothing of my thought of this new-found kinsman of mine—now I knew him—my face must have revealed something to him, or perchance his thoughts centred on me as mine on him. His face was leaden from his wining of the night before ; but his eyes flared suddenly at the sight of me, and his lips curled back. Mr. Gandy, wrapped in his green cloak, and looking grey and old in the morning chill, no doubt noted the expression of his face, and turned to regard us benevolently.

‘What would you not give, Mr. Corbe, as I,’ said he, ‘to have the youth of these two fellows?’

His laughter was thin and piping, as an old

man's. Whereat Mr. Corbe's smile was bitter ; and he tapped his riding boots impatiently with his hunting crop. His eyes met mine, fully—blue eyes they were, as mine are blue—and out of them his hate for me looked forth. Aye, I understood then his purpose of coming to the Black House,—me, who stood for peril to him ; that, whatever part Mr. Pounds might have played in separating me from my kin, Corbe was consumed with terror lest the attorney tricked him, lest, indeed, his hireling—for so I took the fellow Pounds to be—had purposed his coming with me to Corbe to hand me over for a higher price to—to—maybe, to the Mistress of Corbe. And I conjectured, as I passed, on whether my guardian had, in truth and fact, contemplated my restoration ; and the bargain he had struck with John Corbe that morning at *The Gold Scales* to stay his hand. To Corbe I stood a menace, as he a menace to me. And with his hold on Mr. Gandy—his knowledge of his past, and all the law-breaking of his youth, when he played freebooter, slaver, murderer—had he, indeed, broken down my preceptor's resistance of him, and his refusal of the night before to do his bidding ? His bidding—and Gandy had murdered on the cliff that morn ! His bidding—and night on night, since that day, Gandy had drawn the curtains of our bed, and had stood staring down on us—contemplating what ? For this thought—for the thought of the mistress of Corbe—and what our meeting should reveal to us, I was resolved that little time should

pass ere Rob and I were free from the Black House, and seeking refuge in the Manor House across the fenland. Out of the Black House—how? Watched morning, noon, and night—prisoners in the ward of Gandy, one-eyed Ben, Keziah and the blood-hound, baying now within the house. Should the secret stairway from beneath the floor of our bed-chamber lead us out? Whither away did the gallery go—through a secret panel into Gandy's room? Out only by the cave wherein we had heard the sea sounding, and whence the waves and the rolling of barrels had awakened us?

Now all this while my mind was filled with a great happiness, from the realization born of the conversation we had heard the night before, while we lay hid. Surely I was Corbe's kinsman; surely I was the son of the Corbe of the Manor who was dead, and of his wife, who yet dwelt in the house over the fens. Surely I had but to come to her—surely! Yet how came I in the ward of Pounds, fat, little, villainous Pounds, attorney, of Bow Street and the Old Bailey? Stolen away from my home, to serve the ends of young John Corbe, next of kin? Lying awake in the night, I had sought to force my memory back to the time before I came into my guardian's keeping. I could remember nothing. Dreams, only dreams, and the dim recollection of a fair face seen in my dreaming. Such a face as had looked down upon me that night when first I lay asleep in the Black House. Such a face—and yet I could recall . . . nothing . . . nothing!

I ate so little at breakfast that morn, that Mistress Keziah talked of a proud stomach, and a draught and pills—had she the physicking of me! Rob Orme had a prodigious appetite to make amends, it seemed, though I noticed once his hand filch a roll from the table and slide it down into his pocket, and I understood that he laid in provisions for our essay to escape from the Black House. And rejoiced at the thought—escape—escape—and an end to the terrors of night and day, and our coming to Corbe Manor and the lady who should give us greeting.

I have written little of the seaman Ben. Truth to tell, my association with the cross-grained fellow till that day had been so slight that he merited no further description from me. He was quartered for the most in the little lodge nigh the gate whereof he kept the keys. This morn, when we were making from the kitchen into the meadow, old Ben came stumping round to the terrace leading Mr. Corbe's black horse. And with my knowledge of my guardian in his cups, I perceived instantly that the fellow was ripe with liquor. Aye, ripe—for he trolled a song, 'twas a shred of a chanty, I took it—ripe, for his nose was very red, his lips slobbering, and his one eye wild as with storm. And he rolled in his gait as a ship on a stormy sea. Mr. Gandy yet stood upon the terrace with Mr. Corbe, as Ben approached, and we were making our way down. And, instantly perceiving that Ben was very drunk, our preceptor stepped forward, his face

indicative of the liveliest indignation with his retainer. Motioning us away with his cane, Mr. Gandy pounced upon Ben, now propped against the pillar at the foot of the steps.

Said Mr. Gandy, 'You drunken dog! Give me the rein, and be off with you to the gate!'

Thereupon hiccoughs Ben, 'Who's drunk?—Who's——' and added an anathema—to my ears it sounded much as 'swab.'

Mr. Gandy brushing past us hastily descended the steps to snatch the bridle rein from him, when the horse, a big mettlesome black brute, pulled back, tore the rein from Ben's limp grasp, and galloped off down the meadow. Ben, stumbling from his support, sank down heavily upon the step, cursing very foully as he struck the stone.

'Off with you!' snarled Mr. Gandy. 'Swilling you've been till you're drunk! you dog! Off with you!' standing over him and menacing him with his cane, while the pair of us stood on the steps staring at master and man.

'Ay, drunk,' croaked Ben, 'drunk as a fish! Drunk with the rum from *The Virginian*! That's why I'm drunk, that's why! And drunk 'cause of those who drowned—and cried out as they drowned—— And 'cause of all who's drowned—aye, Cap'n—and burned—an' bled—when they've put into this port. It's a port o' ghosts. It's a port o'——'

With a bound Mr. Gandy was upon him—showing an agility and force remarkable in a man of his years. His fine hands were grip-

ping Ben's throat to silence from us, and from John Corbe—now at the head of the steps—his servant's words, and their sinister import. Old Ben let out a yell ere Mr. Gandy gripped his throat, and his great hairy hand and the hook shot up, and caught at his master's wrists. Rob Orme and I had darted forward in our excitement. So nigh were we that as Mr. Gandy's green sleeves fell back from his wrists, as old Ben's hairy forearm was revealed, I saw plainly on the right arm of each the same blue shape tattooed. Across Mr. Gandy's arm—a piece of steel it seemed for the strength of it—across Ben's fat, brown arm—the one shape, as some strange beast or reptile. Mr. Gandy's strength bore the seaman from his feet, lifted him in air, and the blue tattoo mark upon my preceptor's arm was plain to me. And then I saw that it was formed as a tortoise, head and shell worked plate by plate in blue. Suddenly the seaman crashed heavily on the earth, and lay there senseless.

Mr. Gandy turned instantly upon us. His face was flushed with his exertion, his steel blue eyes shot fire, his lips were malevolent. But, as if instantly controlling himself, he smiled blandly upon us.

'It's well,' says he smoothly, 'that you should have witnessed this. After all, it's well! Strong drink—excess, and an honest fellow is no more than a fool.' And changing his tone from preceptor to martinet, he barked at us savagely, 'I'm not overlooking that you've disobeyed me. I bade you begone and you're

here. You're yet undisciplined,' and he cuffed my ears. 'The pair of you,' and he cuffed Rob's. Now after Mr. Corbe's horse and lead it here, while I look to this drunken fellow.'

We shot instantly from the steps into the meadow, leaping over old Ben's recumbent figure. I saw that his face was congested with drink and his fall, and that the blood was running from a cut over his left lug. But his eye was already open, and he was staring up to heaven, dazed, as well he might be, from Mr. Gandy's handling of him. And lord, what a dance did John Corbe's horse lead the pair of us round the meadow that morn.

Allowing us to sneak up nigh to him, almost to catch his bridle, and then snorting and plunging away. 'Twas a half-hour thence, ere catching his foot in the hanging bridle, he pulled up short and we took him captive. And even so he reared, and almost broke away from the pair of us—would have broken away, had not John Corbe come up, and catching his head, mastered him. Leaping to saddle then, without a word of thanks, and galloping round the house and away.

Mr. Gandy had led off his disciplined retainer ere we returned to the steps, though the blood from Ben's ear lay in a little puddle on the ground. We made our way up to the school-room cheerlessly enough, anticipating that the very deuce's own birching awaited the pair of us. Howbeit, when Mr. Gandy made his appearance in the schoolroom—placid of face, spotless of linen, and neat of dress, he made

no further mention of the affair, and set himself easily to the expounding of the *Commentaries*. But once when he rapped Rob's head with his book, the laces slipped down from his wrist, and I saw again the blue tortoise on his arm. His keen eyes perceived my stare, and were evil as he glared at me. Yet his tone was silver still as he expounded the passage wherein Rob Orme had floundered. Only over the black letters of my book that morn I saw the shape of the blue tortoise tattooed; and I had no thought of Gallic wars for wondering what were the past associations of Mr. Gandy and old Ben, and as a symbol of membership of what old gang of rogues the sign of the Blue Tortoise stained the flesh of both.

WE found no opportunity for a week thence to explore further the vaults of the Black House. Mr. Gandy watched us as a cat might watch a pair of mice. His visits to our bedside were repeated, his listening on the stairs constant, unless the stairs creaked under no human footsteps. We went, Rob and I, in constant terror lest Keziah's broom, dislodging the dust beneath the four-poster, should reveal the existence of the trap-door, and our hopes that the vaults would show us the way from the Black House come to nothing. Mr. Gandy was in his blandest—most evil of moods. His voice was silver ; his exposition was never so clear ; our heads rang with his rappings. But on no occasion did we so far excite his wrath that he flogged us. Old Ben was going groaning about with his head swathed in a dirty clout ; his look when we passed him was black, and his cursing under his breath shook him as with coughing. Keziah's watchful eye seemed never off us. When we dared speak apart—only in the meadow or furtively as we lay abed—we were all conjecture of the meaning of the blue tortoise, and how it came

stamped on the arms of master and man, and all hope that Gandy's caution would relax and we be free to make a dash from the Black House.

If we were dull as scholars, our apprehension of Mr. Gandy's prowess with his cane at least kept us passively attentive. And though he watched us for a week, so that we dare not store up more scraps of food and candle ends in anticipation of our escape, I saw that gradually his suspicions were lessening; he stole less often to our bedside in the night and listened less upon the stair. And at length—after a weary age it seemed—he rode off from the Black House on the Friday night for Corbe. He would be absent till midnight, I heard him tell Keziah, as I climbed the steps suddenly from the meadow in the afternoon. Keziah's key was scarcely turned in the lock of our room, ere Rob was probing with the knife—he had hid it perilously in the corner behind my box—for the spring of the trap-door. And, agreed now to make our bid for fortune, we dragged the box against the door of the room, and set the chair against it, so that it might hold out Keziah, if she sneaked up, ere we were burrowing deep below the Black House. But when we came to the foot of the iron ladder and stood above the vault that seemed to go down into the sea cave, we were put into the very deuce of a panic by the sound of a voice echoing up through the roll of the waters.

' 'Tis Ben,' muttered Rob Orme, as we drew back. ' Ben—down in the cave. He's trolli-

ing that chanty he sang the other day. 'Tis there he gets the rum.'

'Let's get away,' I whispered fearfully. 'He'd murder us, I believe, if he found us here.'

In our stockinged feet—we bore our shoes strung by their laces about our necks—we scuttled off, across the platform, and by the rat-haunted galleries, whither we had made our first descent into the vaults. Rob had succeeded in secreting away one of the lanterns which had shone from the cattle's horns on the night of the wrecking; thus our light burned steadily and clearly and we made our way with ease. Rats squeaked, scurried, watched us with evil-glittering eyes;—but we went on fearlessly through the bitter chill of the vaults, until we stood once more behind the panels of Mr. Gandy's study. And now, indeed, by the lantern light we perceived that the panels were so set in as to slide apart, and that the old mysterious owner of the Black House had purposed to escape as easily from the room as by the trap-door in the floor above. Ere I knew, Rob had stuck the lantern into my hands, and was striving to slide the panel back.

'What would you do?' cried I in terror. 'D'ye want to be caught here?'

'No, but I'm going to know what's in the press! That chart Gandy spoke of, if I can move this panel,' all the while driving his nails into the wood.

'Rob, how do you know we can find a way out—yet? We'll be taken! Let's go

on,'—for swinging the lantern I could make out through the darkness that the gallery, though narrowing, was not closed ahead. Even as I spoke the panels cracked and parted easily, and through the opening Mr. Gandy's study was revealed. The lamp was lit, and the room bright with light. The parrot stared at us from its perch. No one was in the room. Rob Orme, gliding in, slipped to the door, to turn the key in the lock, but no key was there. In the hall the hound growled uneasily.

'Rob, let's away!' groaned I.

'Not yet!' And he set a heavy chair against the door. 'Not yet. I'll find out what's in that chest—I will—though Gandy kill me for it.'

So while I shuddered at the opening in the panels, his knife was playing at the lock of the lacquered chest. With age 'twas a rotten piece of metal work—swiftly he had prised it off, and pulled open the door of the press. It seemed that on the instant the room was rich with spices, and bright with colours. Daring in my curiosity to slip into the room at his exclamation, I stood staring. I tell you that from the silver hooks in the press hung a gorgeous robe, of some rich Indian prince, I did believe, and that it burned with golden thread, and tiny gems—green gems and blood-red gems—brocaded in patterns like flowers. And that the perfume of it was as of flowers or spices. But in the press with this golden robe there was nought else, save a little box of black wood, bound in silver and inlaid I saw,

when Rob snatched it up, with the shape of a tortoise in blue sea-shell, having each plate in a separate shred of sea-shell—legs shaped in silver, head shaped in silver, with two minute blue gems for eyes.

‘The blue tortoise,’ whispered Rob, ‘the blue tortoise—always that sign!’

‘Come away!’ in an agony of terror I whispered. ‘Come away!’

And suddenly the parrot screeched from its perch like a fiend. And the great hound set up its baying. And as we rushed for the panel, Rob bearing off the box and the lantern, the handle of the door turned, and Mr. Gandy’s voice demanded angrily, ‘Who’s there?’

We were inside the panel, we were striving to force it back, but it stuck fast and we could not shift it. Instantly at the sound Mr. Gandy propelled himself against the door. I saw him cloaked and black—I saw the flame of his eyes,—I saw the gleam of the pistol in his hand—while yet the accursed macaw screeched from its perch and the hound bayed.

‘What’s this! Stand—or I fire. You!’

And suddenly, as he saw us, the thick oak panel shot from our fingers, back to its place. And the room and Gandy were shut from my sight; and Rob and I were scurrying like two rats down the steps that our lantern light revealed to us. Down! Down! Into a great pit! Above us we heard the pistol bark, and the roar of Gandy’s great voice like the angry sea, and the crash of his body against the panels that shut him from us.

IN our panic we had no thought of our peril of falling headlong into the pit. The lamp swinging in my hands gave us scant light. We were passing down a great tunnel, a natural cave, I take it, hollowed out ages since by the sea, and lending itself readily to the purposes of the builder of the Black House—an additional way of escape. Sand gritted under our feet, the chill about us was the chill of the grave. And no sound reached us, when an instant we paused to hear if Gandy had broken in the panels and was after us.

‘What are we to do,’ gasped I, ‘unless this brings us out? Rob, we’re going deep down into the earth. We’ll never get out.’

‘Belike it leads to the bottomless pit,’ he answered, laughing in his excitement. ‘Or belike it makes to the Manor House. So far as it goes we’ll follow, Jim,—we must! We can’t go back now! Come on, or Gandy will be after us!’

Indeed, far above us I heard a crash as of splintered wood, and believing that our preceptor had smashed down the panel that had

shut him from us, I had no thought save only to be away.

‘Give me your hand,’ cried Rob. ‘We must hold together, lest we fall.’

On we went, our pace impeded now by deep sand piled up loosely, as if the winds blowing through the secret caverns from the sea, played over it at will. Swinging the lantern high I saw that the gallery was growing narrower, for the rocks lowered from the roof above us. And dreading lest still our way should be cut off, I sped on with Bob. We were walking soon over a level floor of sand; and the gallery narrowed still. For the time we might walk erect—for the time—but soon we were compelled to bend low, I going ahead now with the lantern, Rob clinging to the tail of my jacket, so that we might not lose sight of one another. Though we bumped our heads, and though we struck against the rocks, rasping the skin from knuckles and knees, we made all the speed we might, believing that Gandy would be hard upon our heels.

Aye, hard upon our heels! For now afar echoed through the galleries the baying of the hound. Gandy had broken down the panels and had loosed the hound upon us. On now we scuttled, on, and all the while the sound was growing nearer, nearer still, nigh us.

‘I’ve the knife yet,’ cried Rob. ‘I can use it on him. Come on, Jim!’

On now in so narrow a burrow that we were bent nigh double. The hound was upon us.

I heard his rush like the sweep of the wind. 'Show the light,' gasped Rob, 'show the light back.'

Even as I turned I saw the savage brute bear him down. I uttered a cry that would have done Gandy's heart good to hear, to see the brute shaking him like a rat; but even as I dropped the lantern to fling myself upon him, the hound gave a sudden howl of pain; and the blood from its throat splashed over my hand. And it was struggling wildly in the sand, and Rob Orme, staggering towards me, caught my coat tail once more as on we went. Happily the burrow opened out almost immediately, and with the lantern yet burning clearly, thanks to Ben's wrecking, with a very clear and penetrating light, we made out that we were in a vast and vaulted chamber. Breathless and shaken in our flight and the terror of the hound,—still howling in agony from Rob's knife—we paused an instant, and to make out our way thence I held the lantern high. I saw then the wall, it was black and glittering as with veins of ore, going up in rough black pillars to the roof. Above us a shape was wheeling like a ghost—wheeling, dipping on noiseless wing—a great bat, I saw, and I rejoiced, for assuredly an outlet lay ahead. Yet for a moment my heart was in my mouth for terror of this flitting phantom—so it seemed to me.

'Keep to the wall,' I muttered to Rob. 'Come on, man, don't stay. Gandy will surely slit our throats if he takes us here! Rob!'

For he was sick and shaken from his encounter with the great hound, his body quivering yet, when I threw my arm about him, and so forced him on with me. Under the wall then we stole, the lantern light reflected from the glittering veins in the stone. Glittering—illuminated—and, oh God, a shape in a niche in the wall. Human—it had been human—the thing's soul had fled long since—yet it was propped in the niche in the rocks—only the skull of it, and the ribs and the backbone—the arm bones and the legs fallen away. Lord, how the skeleton grinned upon us, as stifling a cry of terror, I forced Rob past it and sped on! How came it there? What was the death of it? And my heart was beating with terror for the thought—that it came as we came into the vaults, and it died as we must die. Rob said no word, nor I, but the bat flitted on ahead of us as a ghost, wheeling, flew back into the light, recoiling, still went on.

The way was narrowing again into a tunnel. And behind us—far behind us the flicker of light. Gandy was nigh—Ben with him. I heard their voices, I heard Mr. Gandy cursing as foully as ever he could have cursed on the deck of his ship, when he sailed on an evil cruise. Therefore, the pair of us sped down the gallery—a winding gallery, in and out—now narrow, now open—once with a green glimmer of light above us, a break in the cliffs,—that gave us hope an instant, till the lamp showed us that the wall went sheer, and we might not climb. But the moonlit heaven

was shown above us, and the racing clouds, through the fern and grass blown by the wild sea wind. The water dripped down from the peat like rain. The bat flew up into the night. Round we went and round, finding no foothold still ; at last taking the tunnel again and passing on. Now the stone walls were wet and slimy ; and the water ran beneath our feet, and the water dripping from the rocks above us in that black burrow drenched us to the skin. Gandy's voice still—Gandy's cursing—risking all, on we plunged !

Nigh us—aye, nigh us ; splashing, spluttering, struggling, cursing—nigh us, and gaining on us. Only the narrowness of the gallery saved us. Aye, so nigh as we sped in wild panic, that each instant I did believe Gandy's claw would shoot out and drag us back.

'Come back ! Halt, the pair of you. D'ye hear me, halt !'

Suddenly the night opened before us. We had darted out into a wide and sandy cavern. I saw the white moon fly through the clouded night, the lashing boughs about the mouth of the cavern, the fens below us. Aye, and across the fens nigh at hand the Manor House, cut black against the night, and a golden star of light shining from one high window. All this—all this while Rob Orme and I dashed out from the cave, and Gandy's voice came bellowing after. Through the furze that tore our flesh, and on the very face of the cliff above the fens. And finding no way down—halting—trapped. The lantern smashed from my

hand. I saw Mr. Gandy's black figure plunge from the tunnel—his lamp swinging high, his pistol a gleam—I saw his face, and the devil of passion on it, and the flame of his eyes!

'At last! At last—my gentlemen!' rushing upon us.

Rob screaming in my ear, 'Jump, Jim, jump. For God's sake, jump!'

So caring nothing now save only to keep from those cruel hands, I leaped down the face of the cliff. Down through the furze and brush that tore my shirt from my back—down with a rush of rubble, Rob and I.

I LANDED on my back in a bed of furze. I lay staring up, dazed for the while. I had a sense of the cold sky above me, silver-blue lit by the moon and a myriad stars. I believed even that I was lying on the four-poster, and that I waited only for Mr. Gandy to draw the curtains and look down upon me. It was the dread of Gandy, I think, that roused me from my half stupor. I staggered to my feet, tearing my hands painfully on the furze. And giddy from my slide down the face of the cliff—I saw it go black above me—I stumbled out of the furze bush, and stood shakily—looking about me dully for Rob. To my joy I saw him leaning against the base of the cliff, the box under his arm, though we had lost the lantern.

‘Rob, are you hurt?’ gasped I.

‘Jim! No! Not hurt. I was stunned a minute, I think! Come away!’ gripping my hand and dragging me off. ‘Gandy’ll have us yet.’

‘Why didn’t he jump after us!’

‘Afraid! He’s climbing down. I heard the

brushwood crash above me ! And a stone fell just as you called. He's climbing down.' Racing on, arm linked in mine.

Peering back as we drew out from the shadow of the cliff, I saw the cave black against the grey face of the cliff, and the furze dull green against it, and a shape dark and sinister against it—Gandy's—climbing slowly down. No glimmer of Gandy's lantern—no sign that Ben was with him. But the sight of his black shape against the cliff—descending slowly in the thought, no doubt, to find our bodies lying broken on the rocks, lent sudden strength to me and speed. Silently we ran then down the slope.

From the white moon our way was clear. We were racing down a grassy incline into a little wood—beyond it still, I marked, ere we shot down into the gloom of the trees, the line of the fens, the reeds, the gleam of silent waters—beyond, the tower of Corbe with its beacon of gold light. And at the thought of her who should await me there—Mistress Anne Corbe—my heart leaped, and my mind was filled with joy.

Now the woodland had us ; now the moonlight was broken by interlacing boughs, though the leaves were falling for winter. Under our feet rustled the leaves—pattering they fell upon us ; easily we went on down a glade that with interplay of silver light and dark, as the wind rustled through the boughs above, seemed enchanted. Silently we ran on, hearing no sound yet of Gandy, going so swiftly that I

was nigh out of breath, and my legs weakened beneath me.

We leaped across a little stream, we landed in a bed of reeds, scaring the wild duck that flew up flapping blindly into the night. And their infernal clamour, I knew, must bring Gandy in our direction. We scurried on—at times plashing in icy water—at times racing high and dry, and for the heat of our flight taking no injury from the chill. So at last we came out on the open marshes whence the stream ran down to the village. I saw before us, as we stood on that last bank, silver waters and grey reeds, beyond the walls of the Manor House, and high over a dark cloud of trees the gold star shining in the turret. And the moon was out on the marshes, all was silver-white and silver-grey and mystical; afar an owl screeched through the night like a ghost. But nigh a quarter mile of fenland lay between us and our haven, and we must yet cross the waters, ere we came into the domain of Mistress Anne Corbe.

Gandy! His black, sinister figure seemed to loom up through the darkness of the wood whence we had come. Gandy—the thought of him lent to us a daring we had not else possessed. And ‘Jim,’ cries Rob, ‘can you swim, if need be? Those pools—deep they may be.’

I was nigh sobbing as I answered. ‘I can’t swim, but I’d sooner drown than let Gandy take me now.’

‘I’ll help you across,’ Rob muttered. ‘There’s no other way. Wait,’ and pointed ahead of us

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to a black line across the waters. Stepping stones—going through the fens toward Corbe Manor.

Darting forward then and crying over his shoulder, 'Be careful lest you slip from the stones and be drowned,' he leaped lightly through the reeds and reached the first stone. And so from stone to stone we stepped, going securely through the moonlight, the water silver on either side—shallow water, I was to learn, though treacherous with bog and deep holes at intervals—crossed by the line of stones set there years since by some old Master of Corbe.

On went Rob, leaping from slippery stone to stone—after him went I. We were midway—in the open space of silver water—ere Gandy espied us. I heard his voice sound across the water, and for the terror of it nigh pitched head over heels into the water. And casting one look back saw him clear upon the bank, a tall, gaunt figure, hatless, white hair streaming in the wind, white face—the gleam of the pistol in his hand.

'Come back ! D'ye hear me ! Come back !' the voice went echoing across the meres. On now we sped ; and sudden through the night his pistol barked after us, and it seemed the ball whizzed nigh my ears. On hearing him following, aye, and as we neared the shore, and bending low burst through the reeds, we heard suddenly a loud splash and yell of rage as he lost his footing and fell. We were on firm ground once more, on the bank, ere

pausing to look back we saw our preceptor rise, streaming with water, and draw himself up on to the stepping stones. I tell you his curses were worthy of the quarter-deck. And that our derisive laughter echoing across the meres was most unseemly. Hand in hand then the pair of us raced forward to the wall of Corbe, now facing us black and high in the night.

Under the wall we raced, until we came before a great iron-studded gate. In the old time Corbe assuredly had been a fortress. And with the terror of Gandy pressing hard on us, we raised a most infernal clamour at the gate, pounding it with our fists, and shouting for admission. Thereat arose the baying of dogs, and presently heavy boots clattered over flags, and a gruff voice demanded, 'Who's there? Who's there?'

'Open,' cried Rob. 'Open the gate for God's sake, open the gate! Unless you'd have murder done.'

The fellow came shambling down to the gate; the gleam of his lantern shone through. And says he, 'Who's there? I'll put a ball into your head, if you try any tricks with me. What's your name?'

'Please—please open,' piped Rob.

Taking courage from a boy's voice the fellow drew back the bars, slowly opened the gate on the chain.

I saw that he was a big fellow—round and rubicund and grey—and that the bell-mouth of his ancient blunderbuss covered us, though

he lacked caution, for his lantern placed him fully in the light for us, whereas the pair of us were hid to him in the shadow of the gate.

'Who are ye?' demanded he. 'Who's with ye? What mischief are ye after? Corbe folk, hey?'

'No, sir,' cried I. 'We've got away from the Black House. Gandy will murder us if he takes us. We seek Mistress Corbe.'

'And who may ye be?'

'Sir, don't keep us here. I tell you I must have speech with the mistress. My name is—Corbe!' I ventured. Then, believing that I heard the reeds crackle under Gandy's feet, 'I think—I think she seeks me!'

'Hey—hey—what? Name's Corbe? What? Well, in you come, the pair of you. In you come! And, mark me, any tricks and off goes this!' fingering the blunderbuss. 'And your heads with it. Come in,' letting down the chain, and admitting Rob and me. The gate clashed after us—and if Mr. Gandy heard the sound, shutting him off from us, I could well imagine the fervency of his curses. My one dread now was lest he should have the hardihood to demand admission, and insist upon his claim to us, ere I had speech with the Mistress of Corbe.

Round and rubicund—clad in a greatcoat, breeches, tops—was the fellow who had admitted us, his blunderbuss in his right hand, his lantern and his keys swinging in his left. And looking down upon us with a humorous eye, says he, 'You're a precious pair of rogues, I

promise! From the Black House—hey? Run away—have ye? From the schoolmaster? The schoolmaster—ho—ho—ho!’

‘We went in terror of our lives from him,’ answered Rob.

‘Flogged you—hey? Is that why you come here—hey?’

‘Sir,’ said I, ‘I tell you I must have speech with your mistress. Is she within?’

‘Corbe!’ muttered he, flashing the lantern in my face. ‘You say your name’s Corbe? What Corbe? There’s none of the name your age?’ scanning my features. And muttering to himself suddenly, ‘Corbe—why—it can’t be?’ and pointing the blunderbuss at us. ‘Go ahead. I’ll take you to the mistress. Down—oh, damme, down!’ to the hounds straining at their chains and baying savagely.

We were in a low-lying court that went about the house, and the lights from the doorway showed a flight of steps going up to its front. The flood of light streamed out as in welcome to me. I had no thought now of Gandy. Only for this great grey pile illumined by the moon, its ivy covered front, the high tower with the lamp shining like a star of gold. Out of the blackness of the court the pair of us climbed the steps—to meet in the porchway a stout woman, in mob cap and profusely flowered gown, who, looking on us with bright and curious eyes, demanded of our custodian—

‘Where are these lads from? What do they want?’

‘They’ve run away from the Black House,’

he answered. 'One of them says they want to see the mistress. Says he's a Corbe.'

I saw the woman throw her hands up into the air, and heard her gasp of astonishment, as she made way before us. And murmur excitedly to our guard, 'It can't be, surely. Oh, it can't be!'

I HAD the sense on me—as I stood ragged and mud-bespattered with Rob in a like case staring into the lighted hall of Corbe—that all this I had known long since—the very glow of the yellow lamp, the open doors cased with iron in patterns of fantastic beauty. And when the serving-woman standing aside allowed our custodian to usher us into the hall—a draggle-tailed pair—I had still the same sense of familiarity on me—the great oaken floor with its Turkey carpet, the oaken panelling, the portraits of dead and gone Corbes peering down from the walls, the oaken stairway to the right, the hearth whereon the logs were blazing, the mantel of white marble, the portrait of the lady in a sky-blue gown and the high collar sewn with pearls, who looked out of her golden frame with the blue eyes of the Corbes. A lovely lady of the days when the second Charles was King of England, lips like a rose, laughing eyed and full bosomed. On either side of the fire was placed a cushioned settle; before the doors old tapestried curtains hung, a precious strip of tapestry wrought in old gold and blue and crimson covering

the spaces of the walls between every portrait. And these men and women of the house of Corbe peered down from the walls on me—I had this fancy—as if they welcomed me.

None the less abashed and having a pretty realization that my jacket was ripped from collar to tail, and that my pantaloons were in tatters from my leap down the cliff, I stood with Rob faltering on the threshold till the serving-man propelled us forward, and the good woman motioned us to the fire, watching me, I saw, with curious eyes.

‘I’ll tell the mistress,’ she said. ‘Keep them here, John, by the fire.’ And murmuring then, ‘Dear heart—dear heart alive,’ rustled away and climbed the stair.

Old John, yet goggling at me, mounted guard over us, though bidding us heartily enough, ‘Warm ye, lads—warm ye by the fire. The mistress will be here in a trice.’

Rob and I, chilled to the bone from splashing through the mire, and our dank sweat-soaked clothes, stood silently by the fire. And my heart was pounding in my breast, my head was swimming. If it should be—and if it should be? But what proof had I—more than the conversation that had passed between Gandy and John Corbe? Every instant anticipating a clamour at the gate, and our preceptor’s demand that we be handed over to him.

But presently down the stairs there came skimming lightly as a girl a little lady. Her silken gown was black—no touch of colour—

only with delicate ivory laces at throat and wrists, a silver-white scarf about her hair and passing beneath her chin. She was fair as a girl, though her cheek was wan, and her lips piteous; her eyes I saw when she flitted forward, and stood facing us, were violet coloured; her hair straying in rebellious curls beneath her scarf was gold coloured. Her hands were clasped at her bosom, as she spoke to us, and she shook as with excitement, her voice tremulous.

‘You asked to see me. I am Mrs. Corbe. Who are you? Why have you come?’

I could not answer. I would have said, ‘I think you are my mother.’ Having no proof than the word of the wastrel John Corbe, not knowing what had chanced in the past, what tragedy had crossed her life, and seeing this little lovely lady in her rich gown—mistress of the great house—I stood abashed, cheeks burning, eyes cast down.

She said again, ‘Who are you? One of you—they tell me—says his name is Corbe.’ And leaning forward, looking into my face, ‘Was it you? Is your name Corbe? Whose son are you?’

I could say nothing for the lump in my throat. Rob Orme, standing boldly forward, said quietly, ‘Mrs. Corbe, we have run away from the Black House. Mr. John Corbe, your kinsman, came to this house some nights ago. And we heard what he said to Mr. Gandy, from whom we have run away. That is why—Jim here—said his name was Corbe.’

'I do not understand,' she faltered, drawing back.

'Madam, John Corbe your kinsman said—not dreaming that we heard—he said to Gandy that he had paid for years to keep Jim here away from Corbe.'

'Paid whom?'

'An attorney in London—one Pounds, Jim's guardian.'

'I do not know the name.'

'Madam, this fellow Gandy spoke of a treasure overseas and John Corbe's chartering of a ship. And that for the chartering your guineas should pay. And they quarrelled, these two, Corbe pressing Gandy to—to make away with Jim here, threatening him with some knowledge of Gandy's past. Says Gandy—if Corbe speak—denounce him—Mistress Ann Corbe should have her wish, and Roger Corbe's son come to his own.'

She uttered a sharp and sudden cry. An instant she stood staring—hands stretched out before her, then leaning forward once again, took my hands—eyes searching into mine.

And, 'Child,' cries she, 'child—who are you? What do you know of John Corbe? Answer me! You name yourself Corbe—who are you?'

'My guardian Pounds—in London named me James Thorne,' I faltered. 'He brought me here, and at *The Gold Scales* we met Mr. Corbe. And he seemed angry, as if he knew me. And then—we heard—what he said to Gandy. That is all.'

Her hands dropped mine—clasped at her breast. 'No more! You know no more? Nothing? When did you come into your guardian's keeping?'

'When I was a little child.'

'A little child! You can remember when you were taken to his house? You must remember—something—before that time.'

Choking I answered, 'I can't remember anything—anything. I seem always to have been in his house. Nothing! Nothing! Only—only—I seem to know this place. And you——'

She gasped for breath and the serving-woman put her arm about her. Pointing at me with shaking hand Mistress Corbe whispered to her, 'Martha—for God's sake!—Look at the child! Tell me—can it be—is it possible?'

Old Martha's kindly eyes looked into mine. And slowly she said, 'He has the Corbe eyes, ma'am! And the Corbe look. As like—as like—Mr. Roger—when he was a boy! And when he spoke just now, it seemed as Mr. Roger was speakin'—years ago! And somewhere he's livin'. Your boy's livin'. Just his years—just as he'd be! Only—only—ma'am—John Corbe can speak. John Corbe knows. And he comes to-morrow . . .'

'To-morrow—how can I wait till to-morrow? Not to know—looking on him, Martha—how can I wait?' And suddenly stretching out her hands to me, 'Child—child—isn't there aught you can remember? Me? This house?

Where you were, where my son was. Can't you remember? '

As I bent my head and stood dully before her, she turned from me and her sobbing tore at the very heart of me.

I KNOW not whether or not 'twas the sound of her piteous sobbing that now brought into the hall from some inner room a gentleman. To the left of the stairway hung a tapestried curtain,—this being drawn suddenly aside revealed this gentleman, whom for the moment I took to be John Corbe, for he was of like height and figure. But eyeing him hopelessly, while Mrs. Corbe clung to her serving-woman, I saw that he was a stranger to me—that whereas John Corbe's face was wine-flushed ever, this gentleman's face was bronzed with the sun and the sea nigh to the richness of Mr. Gandy's complexion. His red hair tumbled in a wild profusion over his brow; he was shaven cleanly; mouth, high nose and steel grey eyes marking his disposition for imperiousness. His fine body was clad in an old and ill-fitting scarlet hunting coat; his linen was frilled; he wore buckskins and top-boots in a villainous state of disrepair. An instant he faltered by the curtain, then says he, 'Forgive me, Mrs. Corbe, I had no idea. I am intruding'—with the accompaniment of a very polite bow.

As he would have withdrawn, Mrs. Corbe

removed from the support of Martha's arm, and lifting up her tear-stained face beckoned to him to approach. He came stepping towards us, a very handsome figure of a gentleman for all the clear fact that he was wearing another man's clothes.

'Mr. Erskine,' murmured Mrs. Corbe, 'I beg that you'll spare a moment. These lads are from the Black House, the house on the cliffs. Whence you tell me that—the night of the storm—you saw the lanterns burn.'

Whereat I felt Rob clutch my arm.

'I ask you to forgive my tears. Something—something that this child has said to me—has torn open an old, a very deep wound.'

'If there be aught in which I can repay a little of my debt to you——' he began, as he stood by her side.

She drew away to the settle facing us, and sitting there, whispered as she dried her eyes; 'Alas, there is nothing, sir—nothing that you can do in this. Only one man can help me—one man living. But, Mr. Erskine, these lads have run away from the Black House. It has an ill-repute—its master is one Gandy, who has been living there these few years. And passes as a schoolmaster. The lads are his pupils. But, sir, the lights you tell of—that wrecked your ship that night——'

Instantly Rob blurted out. 'There were lights from the cliff the night *The Virginian* went on the rocks. Lights on the high cliff, and lanterns on the heads of Gandy's cattle. And his man, Ben, I'll vow, driving them.

They're wreckers in the Black House, smugglers. Aye, and there was murder done on the cliffs next morn, and we have gone since in terror of our lives.'

Mrs. Corbe gasped ; the servants' eyes goggled at us ; the gentleman regarded us with intent and piercing gaze. 'Is this the truth, boy ?' demanded he.

'It's the truth, yes,' answered Rob. 'Jim here and I saw the lights, didn't we, Jim ?' I nodded. 'And next day, getting outside the wall about the Black House, we heard Gandy speaking to some poor fellow from the wreck. Only, when we saw Gandy there was none save he upon the cliffs. Gandy flogged us nigh to death. That's why we escaped from the Black House, by a secret stair. Taking this box from Gandy's study,' holding out suddenly the black casket with the imprint of the blue tortoise. 'See, the blue tortoise on it. The blue tortoise is tattooed on Gandy's right arm, and on his man Ben's. What it means we don't know.'

Staring, the gentleman took the box from his hands, examining curiously the little silver and pearl-shell figure of the blue tortoise with the gems for eyes.

'Always that sign,' cries Rob. 'What Gandy has been 'tis easy to guess from his speech—from what passed between him and John Corbe the other night. Slaver—pirate—he's been. Wrecker we think him—murderer !'

'What is your name, child ?' faltered Mrs. Corbe.

'Robert Orme, madam, at your service. My

father was of the Honourable East India Company. My kinswoman placed me with Gandy—I think for the sake of the stock that is my heritage. Madam—sir—you, maybe, think me lying. I tell you I have said nothing that is more than the truth. Will you listen to us patiently—hear what has been our lot in the Black House? For God's sake hear us! And believe us! For in truth Gandy and his folk were our gaolers, and 'twas never meant that we should come out of the Black House alive. Mrs. Corbe, whatever Jim here proves to be—kin of yours or no kin—I ask you to stand his friend and mine. And never to give us up to Gandy; but be our friend.'

'Child,' she answered steadily, 'you speak of strange things—terrible things. At least I have known long since of lawless doings on the coast of Corbe. I know that the men of Corbe live by smuggling. But this man Gandy—murder—wrecking!'

'Mrs. Corbe,' cries Erskine, breaking in, 'the lights burned from the cliff that night. With my own eyes I saw them, ere my ship made in, thinking to find port from the storm. Pray let us hear the lads' story.'

'Only, Mrs. Corbe,' said Rob, looking towards the open door, 'Gandy followed us nigh here. Hark to the dogs. He is about this place, and he spells danger to us—maybe to you and your folk. He will not let us lie quiet here, knowing that we will speak, and that we have this box. He has a pistol, and he's in league with the men of Corbe.'

She rose instantly from her seat. 'John,' cries she, 'see that the gates are barred and the dogs loosed. And call Robert from the stables to keep watch. You, Martha, go to the kitchen, and bid the maid close the shutters. Bring food and wine for these lads into the library. Mr. Erskine, if you please, we'll go with them, and hear their story.'

He gave her his arm, and holding aside the curtain led the way from the hall, through a door to the left, and into a great and noble room. It had the smell of leather in it, the bindings of the books that tooled and gilded went high up the walls. Above them old paintings—of Italian masters—hung in gold ornate frames, the chimney-piece was of white marble, as the chimney-piece in the hall, the furnishings of old black oak, the chairs covered with worn leather. A dull blue curtain hung half back from the high window, and through it I caught a gleam of the moon upon the terrace, and the black green of the trees in the garden.

The Mistress of Corbe, moving to the hearth, motioned us to chairs on either side, all the while watching me with eyes that burnt into mine. I had a sense that she was striving by scrutiny of my look and feature to be sure; I had a sense that whatever John Corbe might or might not tell she knew the kinship between us, even as I knew it, while it drew the heart out of me. This little lady, delicate and fine, was assuredly my mother; this much we knew—aye, knew—though proofs for her I had none, save John Corbe's words, and the

sense of familiarity which had shone upon my mind illumined nothing clearly for me. Strive as I might I could not turn my mind back, beyond my first recollection of the house of Pounds, the kitchen, Miss Lavinia and the serving-woman.

Rob Orme and I sat stiff and straight upon our chairs before the fire. Erskine, pushing forward a little table, set on it the casket, and drawing up his chair fell to examining it. It was locked, and Gandy alone could have the key. I watched the gentleman's fine white fingers play over the box; presently, failing to unclasp it, he was prising at the fastening with his knife, until suddenly the lock snapped and the lid shot open. Within lay a bag of yellow silk.

Pulling this open, Erskine tumbled the contents upon the board. Instantly it seemed that the dark oak was illumined with magical fires, for on the table lay the precious crucifix and the rosary that Gandy had shown John Corbe.

'The crucifix,' cried Rob. 'The crucifix from the wreck! Gandy didn't lie.'

Now every bead of the rosary was a splendid pearl, and the light of the moon was on them and the rose of dawn. And the cross was fashioned in gold, and the figure of the Christ was carven in ivory, and the blood of His wounds was represented in blood-red gems. When Erskine held up the precious thing it burned in many-coloured fires, so for the time I did believe that the thoughts of all of us centred

wholly on its beauty, and the allurements of the sea pearls. Beyond the rosary there were three rings in the silken bag, all of gold; one set with a dark opal with the colours of the rainbow in it, one with a diamond like a star of white fire, and one with a dull red stone, cornelian or uncut ruby. The silken bag itself was a very rare piece of art—yellow silk worked delicately in gold with flowers and fruits—beside the rings and the crucifix it held no other jewels. Nor for the moment did it seem to contain aught else, till Erskine's fingers probing it drew forth a little roll of yellow linen or canvas, thin, and marked with red stains like blood or rust. And then, indeed, I cried out, 'The chart! It's sure the chart of the sands where the old wreck lies!'

But my cry died on my lips. For as I sprang forward from my chair, I saw against the pane of the high window a bronzed malevolent face peer—Gandy! His eyes met mine fully. And a very devil looked from his eyes to mine. Instantly the face was gone, and the window clear once more, and I could make out the white terrace ghostly in the moonlight, the dull green trees, the sky with the clouds trailing like pale ghosts across it.

MY startled cry, my pointing fingers, sent Erskine at a bound towards the window. 'Gandy!' squealed I. 'Gandy's there—looking in!'

'For God's sake, sir,' cried Rob, following at Erskine's heels, 'be careful. He has his pistols with him.'

Mrs. Corbe had caught the bell rope, and the wild clamour of the bell was sounding the alarm through the house; and the dogs were barking madly. And blunderbuss in hand—to the actual peril of us all—old John was hurrying in, and a young fellow in the livery of a groom with a bludgeon in his hand following after; beyond him I saw Martha, and a scared kitchen wench clinging to her.

And 'W—what's the matter, 'ma'am?' old John was stammering, as Erskine flung wide the window and rushed out upon the terrace. Lord, how the dogs were barking!

'Some one was looking in,' the mistress answered. 'The boy here saw him.'

'Gandy!' cried I, 'looking fit for murder,' whereat the maid shrieked shrilly.

'But how should he get past the dogs?'

growled John. 'The dogs were quiet till the bell rang. And the gate is barred.'

'Go after Mr. Erskine,' ordered she. 'Martha and you, girl, go back to the kitchen, pray! Robert—to the young groom—you and John search the grounds. Your ashplant may be of more service than the blunderbuss,' and her laughter sounded bravely, yet hysterically.

Waving the serving-women from the room impatiently, she returned to the table, and gathering up the gems and the silken bag, thrust them into the casket. And, while Erskine and the two fellows ran down from the terrace into the garden, leaving Rob and me with her, she went silently to a tall oaken desk, unlocked a drawer, and lifted from it a pair of pistols. Turning to laugh upon us, then, and cry, 'Why, what company have you been keeping at the Black House? I never dreamt of aught amiss save for the smugglers down in Corbe. And to hear you we must be watchful, it seems, if we'd not be murdered in our beds.' For all her laughter handling the pistols deftly, looking to priming and loading, and setting the weapons on the table by her.

'Mrs. Corbe,' said Rob, 'we've told you only the truth. And the rosary Gandy spoke of, and the chart here,' pointing to the limp red-lettered rag lying spread out by the casket.

'I'm not questioning it, child,' she answered. 'Pray set your mind at rest.'

'And will you be our friend—not send us back?'

'Send you back! You'll remain here to-

night—I promise you.’ Then leaning forward to me, and looking at me with swimming eyes, ‘Child, child,’ cries she, ‘it may be that you’re to bring great happiness to me. It may be that you’re only going to tear open old, old wounds. But, child, you’re so like—so like one I loved long since—so like—what my own boy must have been—must be, if he’s alive—that, whatever John Corbe will tell—oh, and he must speak, he must speak—I’ll be your friend. Though—though you’re not my son, for the thought of him who should be here—by my side—and for the thought that he, like you, may need a friend,’—and suddenly casting her arms about my neck; and kissing me fully on the lips; and as suddenly drawing back, and hiding her face from me. Gliding then to the open window, and peering out into the garden, whence above the wild clamour of the dogs the voices of the searchers sounded in.

They returned presently — Erskine to announce that they had found no one. But Mistress Corbe would have the great shutters drawn and barred before the window, and ordered old John that the groom and he should watch in turn the night through, armed. Giving the pistols into Erskine’s hands and telling him that there were powder and ball in the desk, ‘They were my husband’s pistols,’ she said quietly, running her hand over the beautiful silver chasing of them. Aye, and ’twas his sword hung from the wall, hilt wrought in silver, blade of fine Spanish steel.

Erskine lifting it down and plucking it from the scabbard confessed a preference for the weapon—handing over a pistol to the groom.

‘Though,’ laughed the gentleman, ‘it seems that we’re making a pretty pother over a schoolmaster. I’m not anticipating that I’ll need to display my swordsmanship, Mrs. Corbe.’ Yet leaving the sword and pistol ready to his hand by the chimney-piece, as we settled down to examination of the chart.

The yellow shred was unintelligible enough to me. ‘Twas drawn by the roughest of cartographers. Erskine pronounced it the mapping of some isle to the north of New Holland. Assuming so much, I did believe from Gandy’s story than from the blood marks on the linen. So far as I might make out, having, indeed, scant interest in the thing for the whirling of my thoughts at the night’s adventures, and conjecturing at what John Corbe should reveal, the marks on the shred of about a half-yard mapped roughly an island, set far north of the penal settlement at Botany Bay—an island like a half moon, a red arrow pointing inshore to the outline of a ship, the fugitive had pictured it under sail. But ‘twas the merest, crudest thing—valueless, Erskine pronounced it—for the purposes of any expedition that Gandy or Corbe might ever have chanced to plan overseas for the treasure whereof the rosary might stand in evidence. Dismissing the matter lightly enough, he thrust the shred of canvas into the silken bag with the jewels, and handed the casket to Mrs. Corbe at the

very moment when Martha's tapping at the door told of her arrival with our supper—a larded chicken, bread and butter, a jug of ale. Mrs. Corbe serving us with her own hands, we fell to heartily, for the hands of the clock pointed towards midnight, and we had made a poor supper at the Black House. But the ale of Corbe was rich and heady—too heady for the weary pair of us—and the end of our meal, partaken while Mrs. Corbe and Erskine by the fire conversed in undertones, found us dull and yawning, and stupid with sleepiness. Still, as the weight of weariness descended on my overwrought mind, I found myself conjecturing wildly how the gentleman should have come into her house, recollecting then that he had spoken of being aboard *The Virginian* ere the American ship went to destruction. And how Gandy and his men should fare at the hands of the American gentleman standing tall and fine against the chimney-piece, and looking down at the little Mistress of Corbe with an admiration so obvious as roused a feeling of jealousy and resentment in my heart.

MRS. CORBE herself lit us to our bed. Martha and the maid, it seemed, had busied themselves in the preparation of a room for Rob and me, while we sat with Mrs. Corbe and Mr. Erskine in the library. For all their haste never had I thought to be housed in such comfort. I have to tell that Corbe Manor was built in the form of a square, only two stories in height, though topped at the eastern end by a tower going up to a high, pointed roof. The Manor was of no great extent—ten rooms only on the second floor—a passage-way extending right and left from the head of the stairway, a second stairway at the eastern end of the passage leading up into the tower, whereon the third floor—I write from my subsequent understanding—the Mistress of Corbe was housed. Smiling at our yawning, as we finished our supper, Mrs. Corbe rang for candles, and bidding us follow her, led us up the stairs, and by the softly carpeted gallery to the room left of the second stair. The light of the fire upon the hearth glowed out to welcome us, as she flung wide the door, and smiling upon us bade us enter. It was a blue room—pale blue hang-

ings to the four-poster—blue rugs upon the polished floor, the oaken chairs padded with dark blue leather, basin and ewer of white china laced with blue. The mirrors reflecting the flames of the logs ablaze upon the hearth seemed to lend new warmth and light and colour to the room ; the linen on the bed was of the whitest ; lavender and roses hung like the memory of summer in the air. A shepherdess with powdered hair and a laced blue gown smiled down from above the chimney-piece ; there was no other portrait, and the old oak of the panels was bare of adornment, save for the four mirrors. Before the window the dark blue curtains were drawn closely—two cushioned chairs were set before the hearth ; and for our greater comfort Martha had hung upon them two vast night-shirts—by the capacity of them, from the wardrobe of old John. For all the delicacy of the room, moreover, Martha had set nigh the fire two wooden tubs, into which the kitchen-maid was pouring steaming water from a pail ; while Martha herself stood superintendent with towels over her arm. I had a fear lest the good woman should herself insist upon superintending the washing of us ; but as we followed Mrs. Corbe into the room the preparations were completed ; and Martha bustling forward announced, ‘ The shutters is barred, ma’am, and here’s the key. If you think they should be locked in for the night,’ going out then with the maid following at her heels.

Setting down the candle on a press, Mrs.

Corbe held out the key to me. 'You may lock your door, child,' she said, 'if you fear that man. Though he's not likely to trouble us any more to-night, I think. To-morrow Mr. Corbe should be here, and we should know something.' Stooping suddenly to kiss me on the brow, and with a sob going out hurriedly.

I promise you Rob and I congratulated ourselves upon this change in our fortunes—temporary though it might prove—all the while we stripped by the warmth of the fire, and bathed and robed us in the capacious night-shirts. But with the warmth and comfort that were ours, sleep bore down our lids and soon we had made to bed—I extinguishing the candle ere I crept in after Rob. Now for all Mrs. Corbe's assurance of our safety, I had a very lively dread of Gandy; therefore I turned the key in the lock, and drawing back the curtains assured myself that the shutters were barred, though the window was unlatched to give us air. Lavender and roses in our nostrils, feather beds under our bodies, through the half-drawn curtains the gleam of the fire. Lying luxuriously—though my mind whirled yet with the thought of what the morrow should disclose—I fell asleep presently beside Rob, who was snoring almost on the moment his head touched the pillow.

And through the night I slept peacefully and without dreaming till the morn was come, and Martha was rapping upon our door to rouse us. Bathed and brushed, if clad in shabby garments, the pair of us descended the stairs,

to find the morning dull and grey—a fog lying over the fens and the cliffs shut out from view. Of Mrs. Corbe or Erskine we saw nothing, were to see nothing till we had breakfasted in the kitchen, with Martha herself to wait upon us. All the while, though she said little, I observed that she watched me from the corner of her eyes, but I took it from her lack of questions that Mrs. Corbe had directed her to ask us nothing. And I found in her a curious mixture of stiff dignity—as towards two young vagrants—and of ill-concealed kindness as towards one who might prove in very truth a Corbe. Her mistress, she said, had breakfasted abed, that Mr. John Corbe was expected to arrive at the house early in the morning; and that Mrs. Corbe required that I should then be with her in the library.

Mr. Erskine came lounging in, as we rose from table, debonair for all his ill-fitting garments, and for the pallor of his face—he had not yet recovered fully from his buffeting in the storm—and bidding us ‘Good morning!’ cheerfully stood straddling on the hearth before the blazing fire, tobacco pipe in mouth.

‘So, you’ve escaped thus far,’ says he, ‘from your cut-throat, Gandy? I take it that he’ll be making over here this morning to claim you.’

‘And if he gets us,’ murmured Rob, ‘the Lord have mercy on us!’

‘Aye, aye, a horsing for the pair of you—eh? But I’m at least promising myself the pleasure of a word or two with him. Concerning certain lights that burned upon the cliffs.’

‘And a man who died next morning,’ muttered Rob.

‘At least a man who saw his ship and his ship’s company drown like rats,’ says Erskine. ‘And came nigh to drowning himself.’

‘How came you ashore, sir?’ asked I.

‘By the luck of the devil, put it so! Floated in on a spar, washed up on the shore nigh Corbe next morning. And would have died at the hands of Corbe folk, most assuredly, but that Mrs. Corbe chanced to ride in at word of the wreck. I had been carried up to *The Gold Scales*—an ill place. And heard them muttering outside my door, ere she came. From the looks of them, when Madam insisted that her folk bring me to her house, planning no good for an American. Harkee, lads, I like these Corbe folk ill. And Gandy, this precious villain of yours, has influence with them?’

‘There is no doubt,’ says Rob.

‘Then if Mrs. Corbe refuses to give you up to him, as like as not he’ll come and take—eh? With the Corbe folk—wreckers,—smugglers——’

Indeed, he did but express my own fears. Gandy, I knew, would not lightly give us up, knowing that we knew what might bring him and his folk to the rope. And having in our hands the tortoise casket and its precious contents. Gandy would rouse Corbe folk against the Manor. Gandy would have us in his house again. And to resist him and the men of Corbe there were in the Manor, so far as I

might judge, none other men than Erskine, old John and the young groom.

Martha and the serving-maid now setting themselves to the clearing of the table and the washing of the dishes, we made our way out of the kitchen, and into the hall, where a fire blazed on the hearth. And here the better part of an hour we passed with Erskine, telling each our tale to him, and hearing his story. He was, he told us, of Virginia—his father had borne arms against us in the war of '75, casting in his lot with the Americans rather than with his fellow planters for King George. And he had owned many acres and many black slaves, and his own fleet of traders. That all going at his death to young John Erskine, our gentleman. That the orders in Council, as the Continental system, checking his trade with France—the losses of his ships, had bitten deeply into his fortunes, till of his fleet were left only *The Virginian* and one other, *The Southern Maid*—he had sought to re-establish his relations with London at the close of the war. And he was come that year on his own ship with a freight of tobacco, rum and sugar, hoping his own bargaining in England might yet restore his fortunes.

'And the sweet leaf,' says he, 'rots in the sea, or goes to line the pockets of Gandy and his wreckers with guineas. And I am like to lose Erskine itself that my father built up in the wilderness. I tell you I have a love for the Frenchmen, lads, and for Napoleon Buona-

parte as a very great Emperor, and as a soldier whose like the world has not seen since Cæsar, your Wellington notwithstanding. Yet am I kin to you Englishmen, and my folk still dwell in Devon, whence my ancestor sailed a hundred and odd years since. And I have a very nice reckoning of the honest dealing of your London merchant. I would have won the price for my leaf and sugar and rum in London. And now have nought to offer. We should hate you English, we Americans. Our blood is your blood; and you would have let it from our veins. And loosed the vile Hanoverian and the Iroquois upon us. I tell you when the tomahawk and the scalping knife were turned to England's service, England had lost America. But had my heart not been drawn to England, ere I came—a very sweet and noble Englishwoman would have taken it for hers—and England's.'

Whereat, again knowing that he spoke of Mrs. Corbe, and that he expressed a passion for her, my jealousy burned in my cheeks and angry eyes, though, American as he was, I realised the good looks and the breeding of the fellow.

We were interrupted in our conversation by a stir and bustle at the gate, the barking of the dogs; and as the groom drew back the bars, the clatter of horse-hoofs on the flags. Into the hall came stepping jauntily John Corbe, spruce as a wooing gallant in his scarlet riding-jacket, his superlative buckskins and shining tops, his heavy hunting crop swinging

in his right hand. But when his eyes fell upon me, peering at him from the settle, he drew back, face suffused, brows black and lowering, lips curling up in a snarl, so that I quailed before him. Erskine, propped against the chimney-piece, regarded him with smiling composure and blew out a cloud of smoke from his tobacco pipe with obvious enjoyment. Old John had come in at the gentleman's heels, Martha appeared from the kitchen. With a wave of his whip towards her, Corbe demanded angrily, 'Who are these folk?'

'Madam's guests, sir,' retorted Martha, with a toss of her head.

'Guests, hey?' with a sneer. 'Tell your mistress that I am here, and that I'm waiting for her in the library.'

'She's expecting you there, Mr. John,' says Martha easily. 'Mr. Erskine, sir, and you'—pointing with her finger at me—'the mistress bade me tell you that she wanted you to be in the library when Mr. Corbe came in.'

'We're at Mrs. Corbe's service,' answered Erskine, knocking out his pipe. 'Come, lad.'

'Wait!' ordered John Corbe. 'Martha, I must have a word first with Mrs. Corbe alone. I'll go in. You need not announce me.' And scowling and black passed through the curtain from us.

But while Erskine and I stood doubtful whether or not to follow him, the bell rang from within, and Martha hurrying in, returned instantly to us. 'The mistress,' says she tri-

umphant, 'asks you, Mr. Erskine, and you'—to me—'to go to her at once.'

I would have held back dreading lest in the interview between Mrs. Corbe and her kinsman my hope—it had been ardent since I had set eyes upon and loved her—might be dashed to the ground. But Erskine, setting his pipe upon the chimney-piece, put his hand on my shoulder, and propelled me into the library. Mr. Corbe—in the worst of moods, by his scowling face,—stood by the window. Madam was sitting at the little table before the fire, her chin cupped in her hands.

'I ask you, John,' she said, as Erskine and I approached, 'only to look upon this boy and tell me—isn't he like the Corbes? Eye for eye—mouth for mouth—hair black as yours.'

The look Mr. Corbe bestowed on me was malevolent. 'Folly,' he said, 'all folly, Anne. The fellow is one of the man Gandy's scholars—a runaway. Have Gandy here, if you will.'

'Is the man Gandy,' asked she, 'a friend of yours, John?'

'I have had some dealings with him, having known him in London.'

'And his reputation?'

'I know little of it. A curious fellow—a seaman once—I do believe an officer of a King's ship. Why do you question me in this way, Anne?'

'You know little of him, then? Do you know an attorney named Pounds?'

'A money-lender, yes,' he answered easily. 'I have had dealings with the fellow.'

‘ This lad’s guardian.’

‘ I am given to understand so.’

‘ You don’t know ? ’

‘ Pounds informed me, one morning, when I met him and this fellow at *The Gold Scales*.’

‘ And did you, when you saw him with the boy, show anger ? Did you ask what was the trick he was playing you ? ’

He lied glibly. ‘ This is all folly, Anne. The fellow should have been in London, had he been serving my interests.’

She nodded. ‘ Did you, the other night, when you were with Gandy at the Black House, offer to pay him for a certain service ? Did you ? Answer me ! Did you ? ’—imperious now, and rapping her fingers on the table, white and vindictive. His face was suffused and his looks lowering.

‘ What do you mean, Anne ? ’ muttered he. And with sudden flaming anger, ‘ I’ll not be questioned by you with these vagrants here. If you would ask more of me—if you’d have an answer—we must be alone.’

‘ This gentleman is here by my wish—and the boy,—too.’

‘ Nay, then, I’ll go ! ’

‘ You’ll remain,’ flashed she, starting from her chair. ‘ Mr. Erskine, pray hold the door.’

Ere Corbe might pass out, Erskine had reached the door, and, turning the key in the lock, stood guarding it.

‘ Did you not say to that man, Gandy, “ The boy once gone—ah, God, had I the courage——” And break off, and he say to you, “ The boy

once gone and you reigning at Corbe"? Did you not?'—with white and darting wrath—'plan with that fellow—that evil fellow—the murder of this boy? And was the reason not that this boy is James Corbe, my son!'

He was livid, yet he faced her boldly, muttering, 'Are you mad? What's this wild tale?'

'Your conversation with that man—your friend, your intimate—was heard—word for word was heard—by this lad and the other. The two were hid in the room where you and Gandy planned a murder.'

'You believe——'

'John Corbe, if I didn't believe, wouldn't your looks tell me? The eyes of you—all that's in them. You planned that the boy and I should never meet. Why? You were afraid when you saw him with the attorney Pounds. You were! Why? Was it that you feared lest Pounds had sold you? Wasn't it—because—because in very truth this is my son? And that the child who was lost from Corbe twelve years since—when Roger Corbe died—my boy—was taken from this place—by you—for you—and given into the keeping of the man Pounds, so that you might have this house and what money should have been the boy's? Wasn't it so? We must not meet, lest I should understand from his looks, his age, he was a Corbe? And understanding ask his history? and know that no gipsy vagrants stole my son away? But that John Corbe——'

A devil of anger was loose in him. Eyes wild,

besotted face purple, lips curling back. He struck the table violently with his gloved hand, crying, 'It's a lie! Madness!'

'So little a child, John, so little a child!' she went on, white now as death. 'Yet standing in your way now that Roger Corbe was dead! So much East India stock—the house in London—this house, its acres—all his, if he lived, but if he died, John Corbe's. Why did you not murder, John? Did you not purpose murder, when you took him from this place—did aught hold your hand? Only a little child—yet standing in your way of gaming, drunkenness with the Regent and his evil company? Stolen from this place, while I lay sick—heart-broken that Roger Corbe whom I had loved was dead. And who so much my friend at that time, John, as you, professing love, devotion, friendship? Oh, to think that but for Roger Corbe I might have wed you! Vagrants, gipsies, and the child snatched away at night—whither? And you riding away that night—in search. And the countryside roused—and nothing ever found. Gipsies or child—John, do you think I've ever believed that tale? That all these years I haven't had you watched? Knowing that if a gipsy stole, you paid the price?'

'My kinswoman!' snarled the gentleman.

'Garvin in London had you watched, whither you went in London. I tell you, John, there is not very much of your life in London that I haven't known.'

'Dearest Anne——'

‘Waiting only till you should betray——’

‘My life has been the life of a gentleman.’

‘So!’ she answered, laughing hysterically.

‘You have been circumspect, John. You have never erred in aught that was of concern to me. You have never gone nigh the fellow Pounds—whatever sums passed between you were paid in secret. I have never known. Only that Pounds should have brought the lad hither! Did you lack the means, John, to pay his price? You should regret now that you did not murder. At least you might have entered into possession. I could not have kept you out of Corbe had my boy died. Why, you were a clumsy trickster, John, if you thought that, till it was proved the boy was dead, you could have Corbe. Or did you think that Roger once dead and the boy gone, I might at last regret and listen to you—wed you? You were a fool, John. You would have murdered—at the Black House!’

‘Anne, are you mad?’

‘John, isn’t this my son? After all these years you’ve cheated Garvin and me? Isn’t this Roger Corbe’s son? Wouldn’t it be wiser of you to speak on my promise that I’ll not raise my hand to have you punished? On my assurance that Garvin shall pay a thousand guineas into your hands—ere you leave England? Will you not speak?’

He answered furiously. ‘You qualify for Bedlam, woman! I know not what lie these vagrants have told you. I know nothing of your son. Is this boy your son, say you?’

I know only that Pounds is the boy's guardian.'

'Yet once again, John Corbe——' she was beginning, when there came a sudden rapping on the door, and Erskine demanding, 'Who's there? What is it?' Martha called—'Oh, Mr. Erskine, pray tell the mistress that a man—Mr. Gandy, he says his name is—has come. And that he wants to see her—at once.'

I felt a shiver go down my back. Mistress Corbe answered—while, livid, John Corbe drew back from the window to the chimney-piece—'Pray show Mr. Gandy into the library at once.'

MR. GANDY came in boldly, hesitating only at the sight of Corbe and his very evident discomposure. The fellow would have made a passable showing at Drury—his demeanour and his dress betokened the model pedagogue, for all his murderous essay of the night before. His silver hair, indeed, was ruffled by the wind ; his riding boots bespattered with mud ; but his linen was spotless ; his suit severe ; his black cloak falling loosely from his bent figure. Never had I seen on Mr. Gandy such an air of age. He bore in his gloved hand, however, a weighty hunting-crop, to be turned, if need be, I did not doubt, into a very serviceable weapon. At his heels, Martha ushered into the room Rob Orme ; on the pair Erskine, with promptitude, locked the door. Mr. Gandy's bow to Mrs. Corbe was courtly—his eyes, I perceived, burned suddenly into John Corbe's.

'Madam,' says he, 'I ask you to pardon this intrusion. And I beg you to acquit me of any share in the annoyance that these truants must have occasioned you. I am here, to be sure, to relieve your household of my rogues.'

‘Sir,’ said Mrs. Corbe, ‘these lads have sought my protection. I have no intention of giving them into your hands!’

‘Madam,’ he answered, with a tolerant air, ‘I can only assume that these rogues have lied to you; and that your kindly heart prompts you to espouse their cause. I am, however, their guardian, and I press my claim.’ Standing before her humbly enough, yet his fierce eyes warring with hers.

‘Your guardianship of them,’ said she, ‘is at an end, Mr. Gandy.’

‘And by what right, Madam?’

‘As natural guardian, sir, of one,’ whereat Mr. John Corbe broke in furiously: ‘Anne, for God’s sake, an end to this mad folly! The fellow is Pounds’ ward, the son of some client of his—maybe, of a rogue who swung in Newgate.’

‘You speak,’ said Mr. Gandy deliberately, ‘of the lad Thorne. I am fully informed, by Mr. Pounds, of his parentage. Equally in his case with that of the lad Orme, I am responsible to his guardian.’

‘So,’ she said quietly, facing the pair of them. ‘So! Mr. Gandy, I tell you that whatever claim you may advance, the boys remain here. That’s all. You need remain no longer.’

‘Madam,’ deliberately yet, though his eyes burned, ‘I am not so to be dictated to. The boys go with me.’

‘They remain here!’

‘I claim them as my scholars. They go with me, or I shall take such steps as may be

necessary for their recovery ! Orme ! Thorne !
—d'ye hear me ?—follow me ! '

' You will take action,' breathed Mrs. Corbe, smiling upon him. ' Will you appeal to the law ? '

' Anne,' muttered John Corbe, ' bethink you of the scandal ! '

' Scandal ! You are suddenly jealous for the honour of Corbe, John ! Mr. Gandy, I wonder at your hardihood in coming here. Knowing what has passed of late at the Black House—what passed last night—I should have thought ere now you would have been making post-haste from this place, thinking only how you might escape from England ! '

' Madam,' with severe simplicity, ' I do not understand.'

' Do you not ? ' said she, laughing. ' Do you not ? Mr. Erskine, pray ! ' Erskine, stepping forward,—easy, smiling, hands in pockets—Mr. Gandy regarded him indifferently. ' This gentleman,' said she, ' is owner of the ship *Virginian*—the ship that went to her death on the rocks the night of the storm. Do you understand me now, Mr. Gandy ? '

' Bear with me still. I do not understand.'

' *The Virginian*,' said Erskine, regarding Gandy savagely, colour hot in his cheeks, eyes alight, ' was lured on to the rocks by wreckers. I've sworn to avenge those who drowned, through the lights that burned on the cliffs that night, Gandy ! The cliffs about your house ! Aye, and a man who died at your hand, Gandy, next morning.'

The movement of Mr. Gandy's fingers beneath his cloak had been hidden from us. But, suddenly, he had leaped back to the door, and in his hand he gripped a pistol—covering us. 'Am I come,' cried he, 'to Bedlam? D'ye charge me with wrecking—murdering? Madam Corbe, you've been listening to a pack of schoolboys lying—lying to save their backs from the rod. Lying! Mr. Corbe, are you a party to this? Stand back, madman'—to Erskine, advancing intrepidly upon him—'stand back! I am not to be trifled with. I go from this place to seek the law that shall restore these cubs into my keeping. My lawful keeping. D'ye mark me, Madam, my lawful keeping?'

'Out of this house!' she ordered him, fearless, body interposing between him and me. 'You are an evil fellow, Gandy, fit tool for such as this man here. And you, John Corbe, out of this house! Your confession still is worth a thousand guineas to you, and escape from England.'

'Anne!' Cowering then before her wrath, Corbe flung the window wide and, stepping on to the terrace, strode away. Mr. Gandy drew from the door to the window on the instant, all the while covering Erskine with his pistol. 'And,' cried he, 'mark me! I'll have these cubs! Aye, I'll have them—what they stole from me. Hark ye—you dogs—your backs shall tingle for this! Ye shall pay, ye shall pay! Mistress, I promise you I shall have my own, d'ye hear me? Have my own!'

And so passed slowly through the window, and followed Corbe. Erskine, ablaze, would have flung himself after him, daring the pistol, but that Mrs. Corbe caught at his arm, crying out, 'No, sir, no; for my sake! For the boys' sake. Heaven knows we shall need your help, if that man rouse the Corbe folk against us.'

NOW, for all the boldness of Mistress Corbe's declaration to Corbe and Gandy, that she believed me her son, it was to be made plain to me, on the departure of the pair, that Madam yet dared not believe her heart. For, though she bent and kissed me on the lips, I saw in her eyes the terror of her doubting; I heard her murmur, 'Dear God, only to know!' And put her hand to her heart, as she turned from me. Erskine and Rob, and old John were staring forth from the window—Martha, timorous, at their heels—watching the departure of Corbe and Gandy from the house. Presently, standing dull and shaken by Madam's side, I heard the gates creak on their hinges, the clatter of hoof-beats on the cobbles sounding their departure. The sound aroused Mrs. Corbe, it seemed, to a sense of Gandy's menace—that he would yet have his own, and that he had ridden forth from Corbe with the one thought—to rouse the lawless folk of the village against us, and bring them back at his heels to snatch Rob and me away by force.

'John!' cried Mrs. Corbe, 'see that the gates are barred. And you and Robert go and

watch there, and let no one enter. Mr. Erskine, pray——'

The room cleared of the serving folk, the gentleman, withdrawing from the window, faced her. Rob Orme and I, apprehensive of the consequences of this flouting of Gandy, stood awaiting her decision.

'This fellow Gandy,' she said, 'is riding for Corbe. What influence he has there I can but conjecture. I think, sir, there is danger for us all.'

'Madam, I am at your service. I wish, though, that the fellow had not been allowed to leave the house. He is dangerous; but surely you have friends in the neighbourhood. It should be easy to warn them, to bring them here.'

'In my widowhood,' she answered, 'I have lived so lonely a life, I have made no friends. And there is none, within twenty miles of this place, who could assist me.'

'None!'

'Perhaps one! My nearest neighbour. A distant kinsman of the Corbes'—Sir Martin Ainley.'

Whereat it seemed to me that Mr. Erskine's looks betokened jealous apprehension.

'That gentleman—he is but late from London—a magistrate—would aid us if he knew. Indeed, he comes here with the purpose—where the excisemen have failed—to stamp out smuggling in Corbe. But he is nineteen miles off, and the roads are rough. It's nigh a day's journey—it would be late ere he could arrive here.'

'Let one of your folk take a letter to him

now. Or, if you fear that Gandy may be too soon, let all go.'

'Is that your advice to me, Mr. Erskine?' she asked him, smiling proudly.

Faltering an instant, he answered: 'It is not my advice, Mrs. Corbe. I should bar well the gates, and set Gandy and his crew at defiance.'

'Such is my purpose, Mr. Erskine. I know these folk of Corbe. I know them for a lawless set—a league of smugglers—wreckers—evil men. And these two lads are here, having at the Black House learned enough to bring the law upon them. And you are here—escaped from the ship they wrecked. Gandy has influence over them. Is the fellow like to spare any effort that may give these lads back into his keeping—them, and the tortoise-casket, and the chart?'

'Will the man dare, knowing that if he do hurt to you, or any of your folk, he'll swing for it, whether he have the boys or no?'

'The King,' says she, 'is not the King in Corbe. The King's justice does not rule these folk. And, seeing the man Gandy—the evil of him, the will—do you believe that aught would stay his hand? Dread of what shall chance to him and the Corbe folk? Gandy, if I read the man aright, will seek to have the boys. Gandy will come here with the Corbe folk in the night, and, though the Corbe folk suffer at the hands of Ainley and the King's men, Gandy will not be taken. So I read it, Mr. Erskine!'

‘What, then, will you do?’

‘Defend my own,’ she answered. ‘My groom shall ride to Sir Martin, and we’ll remain here.’

She rang for Martha, and bade the groom Robert saddle and ride apace to Sir Martin Ainley. She penned a letter hastily, and, within a quarter-hour of Gandy’s departure, Robert was riding through the gates to warn her neighbour of the danger menacing the house, and to beg his aid. While Madam wrote her letter, Rob Orme and I made out from the library into the garden. The fog had lifted now from the fens. From the terrace about the house we could look over the reedy meres—seawards, the cliffs, whence we had fled from the Black House—a wall shutting off Corbe from the sight of the sea. The meres were alight with wintry sun—through it, from the main gate, a road going clear across the marshes towards the village, marked by the chimney smoke afar. The Manor had been built upon a rising ground—maybe for a stronghold of the Corbes, centuries since; from the broad terrace steps led down into a great garden. The coming winter had set its blight upon it—no flower bloomed, though the walks led into rose arbours, nigh leafless now; the lawns were trim, and clear of dead leaves; against the high stone wall, that with its two iron gates guarded Corbe, fruit trees were trained; beyond the wall the woods went down to the fens. Inland, we saw only the stretch of fens, till the hills rose and shut out our view,—we could make out no sign of dwelling, save only the

curl of smoke from some poor cot afar. Lonely—the Mistress of Corbe, assuredly, had dwelt lonely in her widowhood. And now to guard Corbe, if Gandy and his evil company of rogues made thither, were left Erskine, old John, the women and ourselves.

Rob and I paced the terrace dismally enough. And I counted it the more the mark of his friendship for me that he said nothing of my kinship to the Corbes, while John Corbe had told nothing, and in very truth, though Madam had revealed her heart and her belief, we knew no more than when we fled from Gandy the night before. Else, Gandy and the menace of him possessed our thoughts. To fall into his hands—Lord, the flogging that awaited us!

We spent the remainder of that day between the terrace and the kitchen—dully, for Erskine scarce came nigh us, and Madam not at all. Indeed, Rob Orme and I were left alone to bear each other company; Mrs. Corbe and Erskine passed the afternoon together in the library—I took it, Madam reasoning with him on what had passed that noon, and what the actual purport of the scene with Corbe, and my chance kinship to the Corbes. In the kitchen, old John had set himself to the cleaning of his blunderbuss and the pair of pistols from the little oak case which bore the name of dead Roger Corbe. And, save these pieces, there was in Corbe no firearm to hold off Gandy and the men of Corbe, if they should come that night before Sir Martin Ainley and his folk should reach us. Pistols and ancient

blunderbuss ; else old John prepared for the defence of Corbe the rapier—Toledan steel—a lean and glittering blade, with the haft inset with little flowers of silver and tiny blue jewels, so that when it left the old man's hands for Erskine it was one piece, gleaming with white fire. Aye, and Erskine's eyes gleamed as he set his fingers on the rapier and made play with swift and facile passes.

'If I cross swords with your preceptor, lads,' cried he, laughing upon us, 'I promise you he'll pay for all your flogging !'

Now all that day the gates of Corbe remained fast shut, and none came nigh, and the two great hounds guarding the house lay quiet in their kennels. With the dropping dusk came Madam from the library—white and wan, but smiling bravely enough upon us—to order John look once more to the gates, ere the house doors were closed for the night.

'While you and I, Mr. Erskine,' said she, 'will make the rounds of the shutters, to be sure that Martha and the girl have not been careless.'

So by dark the Manor House was barred and bolted, and the shutters clamped. Across the oaken door looking towards the Black House, and across the door looking inland, great bars of iron, dating back to wilder times, were shot ; the door of every room on the ground floor was locked from within, and we all—save Madam—assembled after our supper in the hall before the fire. Save for Erskine and old John, we were a dismal company ; Rob

Orme and I sitting dolefully together on the settle ; Martha with her knitting in an armchair by the fire ; the servant-maid shivering beside her. But the fire on the hearth blazed high, and Erskine's laughter, as he told a merry tale of the slaves on his plantation, and old John's chucklings were brave to hear. Without the hounds bayed from time to time, when the wind came rolling up from the sea, and beat against the gates of Corbe, as if it sought to force them in ; and leaping the wall like a thief, smote heavily against the house. A moaning wind, with the menace of storm in it, growing in force with every gust, rumbling in the chimneys, once whirling out the ashes into the room. And soon like distant thunder the roll of the waves against the cliffs below the Black House.

The night drew on. Erskine had fallen to silence, and sat staring at the fire, as if wrapt in profound meditation, though, eyeing him from time to time, I understood soon that he was listening for aught that, in the intervals of the gale without, should indicate peril to us. Old John was dozing, snoring when he slept, waking as he pitched forward, shivering and yawning then in the most comfortless manner possible. And Rob Orme and myself sat as dismally, awaiting the coming of Gandy and the men of Corbe, which we believed, the pair of us, inevitable.

All this while Mrs. Corbe came not nigh us. She had withdrawn to her chamber—to watch from the tower, I understood later. And I

found myself conjecturing, pitifully, what should be her thoughts, and whether John Corbe should ever be made to tell the truth; and whether the truth should mean that I was son to Roger and Mistress Corbe!

Watching in the high tower! Watching—for, as the clock upon the chimney-piece struck the hour of eleven, I was startled suddenly by the sound of footsteps on the stair. Madam came speeding down, a cloak over her gown and hair, her face very pale, and her eyes affrighted.

‘Mr. Erskine—John,’ she breathed. ‘I think—they come!’

In an instant, Erskine was upon his feet, and had snatched a pistol from its case upon the chimney-piece, and drew the long, glittering rapier. And old John was gripping his blunderbuss, and Martha chiding the sobbing maid for a foolish wench.

And cries Erskine: ‘Madam, at your service!’

She came down the stair. She moved towards the chimney-piece, and took the other pistol from the case. And she said—

‘Martha, you will go with Janet to my chamber, and lock the door. You will go with them’—with a wave of her hand towards us.

‘Mrs. Corbe,’ says Rob boldly, ‘we’ll stay here, if you’ll let us. If they break in they must have us. And we may be of use to Mr. Erskine and your man to hold the stair.’

‘I’m of a like mind,’ I muttered. ‘What use for us to be locked in the tower?’

‘Brave lads,’ she said. ‘But——’

‘ If they break down the door,’ said Erskine, ‘ we’ll yet have time to make for the tower. Let the lads remain.’

She nodded. ‘ Have it so. Martha, go with Janet !’

‘ But you’ll come with me, ma’am,’ Martha besought her. ‘ Or let me stay with you.’

‘ You heard me, Martha. Go !’

Martha, obeying, led the fainting girl away. Mrs. Corbe, turning to Erskine, whispered : ‘ I was in the tower—looking from the window—along the road that comes from Corbe. And, when the wind dropped a while since, I fancied that I heard voices—far away. And then the clouds passed from the moon and I saw them—coming. Many of them—making this way. Sir Martin will be too late——’ She broke off suddenly—and leaned forward. ‘ Hark !’ says she, ‘ they’re nigh. Put out the light !’

The wind was rolling up from the sea. The very house seemed to shake before it. But fierce and clamorous above it, sounded the baying of the great hounds that guarded Corbe.

I HAD sought a weapon, when first Mrs. Corbe came speeding down the stairs. I had snatched up the heavy iron poker, and thrust it into the coals upon the hearth. So standing there, till it should grow red-hot, I waited silently with Rob and the rest, while the hounds bayed madly, and upon the gate there came the sound of knocking, and a growl of voices from without the walls. I did believe that I could hear for all the clamour of the wind and sea and the continuous baying, the voice of Gandy, savage and triumphant, above the voices of the men of Corbe.

‘ Shall I go out and have a word with them ? ’ muttered Erskine.

‘ What use ? ’ asked Mistress Corbe.

‘ None, save that it might delay them.’

‘ And the hounds tear you down. Poor brutes, they’ll defend us to the death. Hark ! they break down the gates.’

Resounding blows at the gates ; a roar of voices ; the hounds defiant within. A sudden crash, and the clank of iron, as if Gandy and his folk had propelled some heavy body against the aged timbers of the gates to bear them

down. The baying of the hounds was nigh to madness.

The gates were down. Down; for the screeches that arose, the savage curses—and the sudden shrieks, that for the horror of it made me drop the iron reddening in the fire, and gasp and cling to Rob.

‘The hounds are on them,’ muttered Mrs. Corbe.

The shrieking died. The outcry at the gates sounded above the wind. Gandy’s voice, trumpet-like, ‘Stand back, you fools, give me room!’ And on the instant a hound’s cry of agony as, I took it, Gandy’s knife let out its life. A second cry, and a hoarse roar of voices, the clattering of heavy boots over the cobbles, as the Corbe folk rushed the door.

Gandy was beating on the door. Gandy’s voice was shouting, ‘Open! d’ye hear me, Mistress Corbe? Open!’ And ‘Back, you fools, wait!’

Mrs. Corbe, proud and white, had stepped forward to the door, though Erskine sought to stay her. And she demanded in imperious tones, ‘Who is it comes so late? Who knocks?’

‘Mistress Corbe, your neighbour, seeking two runaways, and stolen goods. Asking only that they be given to him.’

‘Gandy,’ she answered, ‘you come like a thief in the night. You break down my gates. I warn you that you’re like to hang for this.’

‘I’ve no time for folly, Mistress Corbe,’ he

roared back. 'Where are the boys, and the casket they stole from me? Open the door!'

'I shall not open!'

'Then we shall break it down!'

'You threatened me this morning, Gandy!' cried she. 'I warn you and these fellows with you that you'll pay for this. I warn you that ere now Sir Martin Ainley has had word, and rides this way. Look to it!'

'Will you open the door, woman?' snarled he. 'Or must we break it down?'

'I shall not open. We are armed. If you dare set foot in Corbe this night——'

'Down with the door!' he ordered; and, instantly, the fellows with him were beating on it with cudgel, hammer and axe, and, though it held yet, the timbers cracked under the blows. And the roar of their voices came in upon us.

'To the stair, Anne!' cried Erskine, 'you and the boys. You, too, John,—I'll hold them for awhile.'

She shook her head, though she motioned to Rob and me. Rob had caught up a cudgel old John had laid by the hearth,—I held the iron yet to the fire, red-hot now. Old John, by Erskine's side, fingered the blunderbuss. Under the crashing blows the door, for all its oak and iron, was giving way—splitting apart—gone from the hinges—held now only by the iron bar across it. Asunder! We saw their faces, then, with the gleam of the firelight from within upon them; and their voices roared menace to us. Instantly old John had

fired the blunderbuss upon them, and at its bellow a yell of rage went up from the door, and for the instant it was clear, ere the cloud of smoke blotted out the sight. Yet again they came onwards with a rush, and, as the door went down, I saw Gandy, like one possessed, plying an axe, that split the planks as match-wood.

The door lay in wreckage. Only the bar and the ruin held them from us. And Gandy had dropped his axe and caught the wreckage in his hands and cleared the way. Upon the instant, Erskine's pistol spoke, and through the smoke the American leaped into the doorway, shouting to us, 'Make for the tower! While I hold the door!'

I saw him so, a lithe figure of steel, stripped to his shirt as for a duel, and the rapier flashing in his hand. I saw him so, ere Gandy's pistol cracked from the doorway and the smoke blotted out all things. But Mistress Corbe had caught me by the shoulders, and was drawing me with her to the stair, and she and Rob and I were racing thither, and old John was lost to us, equally with Erskine, in the smoke, and all was clamour, outcry, and the flash of steel.

I held the red-hot iron still in my hand, as, shaking off Mrs. Corbe's grip upon me, I clung to the baluster. I had a sense that Rob and she were by me—else my thoughts were centred on what passed in the doorway, under that cloud of smoke.

Erskine was beaten from the door! They

were in upon us,—a fierce company of rogues. So much the firelight showed me,—whirling figures—levelling furious blows at Erskine, while still his rapier made play. Gandy—I marked him,—heard his great voice bellowing—saw his hunting crop strike down old John—ere I drew back up the stairway, as Mistress Corbe plucked again at my shoulder, and she besought me, ‘Come away, child! For God’s sake, come away!’

Erskine was holding the stair. Aye, the logs blazing up illumined his white figure, and the Toledan rapier in his hand—that, darting like a snake, still held them back. One fellow had bent low, had rushed by him, was leaping up the stairs towards me—old Ben! And, on the instant, I had thrust the hot iron into his face, and he had screamed horribly, and tumbled back down the stairs. The iron fell from my hand with the sickness of it. And Mrs. Corbe and Rob were plucking me back, and leaving Erskine there, despite ourselves, we were speeding along the passage to the stairs that led to the tower. But it seemed to me, ere sick and faint they drew me away, Erskine’s rapier had been struck from his hand, and he was down among them.

Up the stairs ran we to Madam’s boudoir in the tower, and at Madam’s cry old Martha had the door open, and we were through in the dark, and the door was shut at our backs. But Mistress Corbe was sobbing, ‘I must go back! I cannot leave that gallant gentleman to die. I must, don’t cling to me, Martha!’

‘Madam, in heaven’s name,’ gasped the old woman, clinging to her.

And ‘Madam,’ says I, ‘Rob Orme and I go with you. Give us up to Gandy. You cannot keep us here.’

But ‘Never!’ cries she. ‘Never. Not while a door of Corbe can shut them out.’

‘Then,’ mutters Rob, ‘if there be any way down from the tower, let us leave the house and try to get away in the dark—Jim and me.’

Madam had snatched the keys from her chate-laine, and was thrusting them into Martha’s hands. ‘By the stair,’ she was gasping. ‘Into the garden. Go silently! Let them out the green gate. They may escape that way. I go—back to him!’

‘Madam,’ faltered I, ‘I should go with you.’

‘Child!’ cried she, ‘they dare not harm me. I am not afraid. They shall not have you. Go!’—and suddenly bent forward from the door and kissed me on the lips. Unlocking the door then, drew back from Martha’s hands and swept down the stairs towards the clamour about Erskine.

Old Martha, sobbing, muttered, ‘Come; this way! Quickly. I must be with the mistress!’ So led the pair of us through the dark and, stumbling by a little doorway down an iron stair, unlocking then a door, brought us out into the night. None stayed us. The wind deadened all sound we made. They were intent still upon the stair.

None stayed us, when we hurried over the grass, and to a dark gateway in the wall. And,

silently, old Martha had unlocked it, and we were without the wall, and scurrying like rabbits for the shelter of a coppice that showed black above the road going to Corbe.

WE hurried into the tangle of reeds and brambles beneath the wind-tossed coppice. We were heedless of the thorns that tore our garments and our flesh. And, awhile we lay there, listening with straining ears for the clamour of voices back at the Manor.

And 'Rob,' gasped I, 'what will they do to Mrs. Corbe and Erskine, when they find us gone? Murder, think you?'

'Gandy'll not dare——!'

'What does Gandy not dare? He's brought his neck within reach of the rope often ere this.'

But he had clapped his hand to my mouth, and was peering forward through the brushwood down the road. I heard then the clatter of horse-hoofs as the rider swept by. He was spurring forward at high speed, plying his whip, and cursing his mount savagely, and he was past the coppice in a flash, and under the wall of Corbe. But, with the moon now shining white from the broken clouds, I believed that I saw John Corbe making back as furiously to the Manor as he had ridden from it that morn. And I took it that the gentleman was

speeding thither, either to play the gallant deliverer of Mrs. Corbe from Gandy and his men, or to be assured that I was securely restored to the hands of his partner in evil.

' 'Twas John Corbe passed,' I muttered to Rob. 'Shall we go back? Dare we leave Madam and her women—if Erskine be dead—to face these rogues alone?'

Awhile Rob hesitated, liking as little as I the thought of scurrying away from our friends in Corbe. But he answered finally, 'We can do nothing. Save, maybe, hurry Sir Martin Ainley hither. Let's away, ere they're after us.'

So we turned our backs upon the Manor, and, by the light of the moon, raced off above the road. Brier and furze and brushwood, for the most—at times stretches of broken rock; at times patches of grass; at times coppice and wood. In the open, the wind beat furiously upon us, so that we made poor going,—our clothes, mended by old Martha during our stay in Corbe, were briar-torn afresh, and our feet bruised and blistered from the stones. Yet on we stumbled, running together when the way was clear, but for the while we dare not take the road lest we fall in with any of Gandy's rogues left to guard the way against the chance rescuers of Mistress Corbe and her folk. We had been travelling an hour, it might be, when, breathless, we came out ere we knew above the road. And with the moonlight we made out below us a stone bridge, spanning the stream that should run through the village,

and the one road striking down by its bank, and the highway going up the hill before us. Silently, then, we dropped down from the bank, and stole in its shadow towards the bridge. And, suddenly, Rob Orme gripped at my arm, and whispered, 'D'ye hear aught?'

Straining my ears to listen then, I made out, at a break in the great wind blowing up, the clatter of hoofs on the road, and I did believe presently the rumble of wheels.

'Sir Martin Ainley, d'ye think? D'ye think?' gasped I.

He muttered, 'Keep in the shadow! It can scarce be yet.' And he pulled me back against the bank. And sudden like the moon above the hill; the flash of carriage-lamps on the high road topping the rise above the bridge; and a carriage coming at a great pace; and two riders galloping beside it; and, by the sound and the thunder of hoof-beats, a company pounding after. The moon was mercifully clear from the broken clouds, and plainly we saw them come,—carriage and pair rolling down, riders beside it, riders coming after; aye, and as they thundered over the bridge, and were nigh us, I recognised, spurring hard by the wheel, the young man Robert. Thereupon we set up a yell, the pair of us, that caused his mount to shy and nigh throw him from the saddle. But, mastering his horse, he roared out in answer to us, and to the driver of the carriage, and the company of riders. 'Stop! Stop! The lads!'

Leaping down then and demanding, 'How

d'ye come here? What's amiss at the Manor?'

'What is this?' growled a heavy voice from within the carriage; and a plump white hand, flashing with rings, let down the glass. And out there peered, as Robert pushed us forward, a red, choleric, handsome face, with a quizzing glass stuck before his right eye.

'These boys, Sir Martin, from the Black House!' explained Robert.

'Byes, hey? What byes? Oh! yes, yes,' and Sir Martin Ainley, opening the carriage door, stepped heavily out. In the light of the silver lamps I saw him for a huge and rotund gentleman, not so very tall, but very broad. His hair was worked up into ornate black curls under the brim of his low-crowned hat; he had a rich violet-coloured shawl muffled about his throat; else his body was cased in an immense green greatcoat, with many flaps and pockets and silver buttons; a pair of dazzling high boots were on his feet. His big face was crimson and congested; his lips full; else his features were fine, and his look imperious.

'What do ye here, rascals?' Sir Martin Ainley demanded.

And Rob gasped out, 'Oh, sir, pray hurry to the Manor! Gandy and his men are there—have broken in, and Mistress Corbe and her women are at their mercy.'

Whereat Sir Martin rapped out. 'The deyvle! And you've run off, leaving that very charming lady, my neighbour, Mistress Corbe——?'

'By her bidding, sir, that we might not fall into their hands. We did not want——'

‘We waste time here!’ Sir Martin cut Rob short. ‘Into the carriage! You can tell me as we go.’

‘But, sir, there are many of them—thirty or more.’

He nodded. ‘You, Robert—what the deyvel’s your name?—ride well ahead! You, Giles, bid your fellows go in a body. Look to your barkers! In with you!’ to us. And we were leaping into his luxurious carriage, and he was lumbering in after us, and sitting facing us, and the next instant we were thundering down the road to the Manor.

‘Now for your tale—you!’ poking a jewelled forefinger at Rob. ‘Be brief! What’s chanced?’

Gasping still from our wild race through the night, Rob recounted for him the story of what had passed that night at the Manor, all the while Sir Martin cursing, blowing his nose in a wisp of cambric.

‘So!’ he growled. ‘So—they’ve dared! The dogs! They’ll swing for this—Gandy and that seaman! And the rest of the crew’ll go overseas—for this! I’ll teach these rogues to rue me! I’ll teach—I’ll teach them! They’ll march the Rogues’ march to the tune I’ll set ‘em’—with many curses interspersed. And sudden, ‘And, by the Lord Harry, if they’ve so much as laid a finger on that very charming lady’—kissing the tips of his fingers—‘the whole damned pack shall swing, if there’s a rope in England, come the Assizes! Upon my body! Upon my very soul!’

Then poking his finger at me. ‘You’re the

bye that claims to be Roger Corbe's son. That fellow told the tale! And, egad—you're like him, too—you're like the Corbes. Who should know better than I—Roger Corbe's friend? Damon and Pythias were we, we drank four dozen of port on a night '—breaking off and fixing me with his quizzing glass. Rumbling on again in that rich tone of his, 'You're wondering why I'm riding in this coach instead of being in saddle! My most infernal gout! Driving home from quarter-sessions, I chanced to be, when Mistress Corbe's fellow and my folk came riding up. And off we make, tally-ho, for Corbe.'

'John Corbe's ahead of us,' I ventured.

Whereat Sir Martin scowled black, and his crimson face in the lamplight seemed to grow purple. And choked he, 'And what the deyvle's John Corbe doing at Corbe!'

'Maybe he's gone to rescue Madam; maybe to set his fingers on me again.'

Whereat Sir Martin lurching forward let down the carriage glass, poked out his head, and roared, 'Make on! Why the deyvle are you dawdling, ye dawgs! D'ye hear me? Make on!'

Resuming his seat, he set himself to the examination of the loading and priming of a pair of pistols from an oaken case beside him on the cushion! Muttering to himself, 'The black-guard! The damned black-guard!' with an ill-humour so evident that his tender passion for Mistress Orme and his distaste for John Corbe, as a rival, were emphasized.

On now at a new speed, going breakneck by the way to Corbe, and sweeping up the road to the broken gate. Sir Martin, poking his pistols into his pockets and gripping a thick Malacca cane in his hand, as the carriage drew up, descended majestically. From within the Manor came no sound. Sir Martin's men, a dozen or so, rested in the saddle by the gate.

'It's most damnably quiet,' growled Sir Martin. 'You, Giles'—to a big fellow leaning from his saddle—'take a couple of men and look to the other gates. D'ye hear me? Let none pass! You'—to Robert and another youth—'come with me. See to your barkers! Come!'

And through the gates swung Sir Martin with the two fellows, and Rob and I unbidden sneaking at their heels. From the shattered hall shone the light—with that and the moon I made out the bodies of the hounds lying in a welter of blood by the gate—no human shape, though Erskine's fire, I had believed, had brought down a man and the hounds had torn down another, ere Gandy cut their throats. But the light streamed out from the door, and a figure shaped against it; I uttered a cry of joy, it was Mistress Corbe. Sir Martin, mounting the steps, swept off his hat in a most profound bow. 'Mistress Corbe, you are unhurt—by providence.'

'Sir Martin!' she uttered a cry of pleasure. 'You've come soon—yet too late—too late!'

'Too late!'

'There have been wild doings at Corbe this night.'

'Aye, these byes have told the story.'

She ran forward at that with a laughing sobbing cry. She caught our hands and she kissed me, and saying, 'Come inside, pray,' led the way into the house.

The fire yet blazed upon the hearth; the lamp was lit; the room all in disorder, splashes of crimson lying sinister upon the floor, crimson against the white wall by the stair. Old Martha and her maid, with a bowl of steaming water, and a shred of linen, were tending the broken head of old John, who, very white and bemused, was set in a chair by the fire. And propped against the chimney-piece stood John Corbe, black-browed and frowning, his boots and buckskins and his red coat yet splashed from his ride, and his hair tumbling in wind-blown rats' tails over his eyes. But of Erskine or of any of Gandy's folk no sign.

'They have ransacked the house,' murmured Mrs. Corbe weakly. 'Seeking the boys! And not finding them, maybe hearing your coming from afar, have gone.'

'Whither?' growled Sir Martin, scowling at John.

'I think across the marshes to the Black House.'

'The rats! Oh, by Gad, I'll smoke them out. Oh, by the Lord! Well, sir!' with a sudden savage bark, and pointing with his cane at John.

'You're tardy on your magisterial duties, Ainley,' sneered the gentleman.

'Not too tardy to lay an odd rogue or so by the heels,' snarled Sir Martin. 'What the deyvle's your share in this infernal business?'

'You're insulting, sir!' cried Corbe.

'Insulting! So! There's a way for gentlemen.' Sir Martin was swelling like a turkey-cock.

But Mistress Anne broke in. 'Sir Martin, Mr. Corbe, pray! While you wrangle here——'

'Wrangle, madam, wrangle!' protested the justice angrily.

'Wrangle! A gallant gentleman is in the hands of those rogues, wounded and like to die!'

'A gentleman! Oh, the American rebel!' Sir Martin snorted.

'A very gallant gentleman,' repeated she. 'Mr. Erskine, from the ship *Virginian*, wrecked on this coast weeks back. He held the stair while these lads escaped from the house; Gandy and his rogues struck him down. When I came back by the stair, they were dragging him away. Bleeding from a blow on his head! Looking like to die!'

'Why should they burden themselves with him? What should they want with him?' muttered the Justice.

'I know not,—save that he had escaped from *The Virginian*. And that Gandy and the Corbe folk lured her to destruction on the rocks. And that he accused Gandy and threatened

vengeance. Or that not finding the boys they dragged him away to wreak their vengeance on him. Maybe—to drown in the marsh—or to be murdered at the Black House.’ And shuddering violently Mistress Anne turned from us, mopping her eyes with her kerchief.

Sir Martin, regarding her grief with jealous displeasure, growled, ‘I’ll leave three or four of my fellows here, and ride round to the Black House. By your leave, Madam,’ and rolled out to roar his orders to Giles.

Now the thought of Erskine in peril, and of the likelihood of wild doings on the fens, shut from my mind the thought of Mistress Anne, and the folk in the house. And out at his heels I sped with Rob, and down to the gate. Sir Martin’s men were drawn back under the wall; the carriage waited with the coachman leaning down from his perch. And with the black clouds of the wild night the moon was hid; only the carriage lamps gave light; beyond their rays the darkness hid marsh and cliffs, as with a heavy pall. A restive horse rearing nigh trod us down, and to escape it Rob and I scurried from the gate, and as it swerved were driven out of the circle of light into the darkness towards the marsh. Out of the circle of light—out of the safe keeping of our friends.

Suddenly, ere I might cry out, a sack or cloak was thrown over my head—muffling me, choking me—fingers of steel were on my throat, throttling me. And, like a sack of meal, I was caught up into strong arms and borne away. Wild with terror from the shock,

kicking, struggling, helpless, I realized with sickening dread that again I was in Gandy's hands, and belike Rob, who had been standing by me in the circle of darkness.

SO struggling wildly, till at a savage wrench, at my arm, and Gandy's bitter voice in my ear bidding me be still, or he'd slit my throat, I gave up my hopeless contest with his strength, and shaking in every limb, was borne on by him at a great pace out of hearing of my friends. And suddenly he flung me down, and snatching the covering from my head clapped his hand to my mouth, and held me to the turf, looking down at me with malevolent eyes.

'So, my dea pupil,' snarled he, 'we resume our happy associations. Dirk—you there!'

A bearded fellow smelling most evilly of fish and rum shaped up through the light flung by the escaping moon.

'Rope here—a gag,' muttered Gandy. 'Truss him up, while I hold his mouth. Have ye the other rogue?'

'Spliced up, down in the reeds!'

'Good! Now!' And with his hand about my mouth Gandy forced me round; and the fellow Dirk gripped my arms behind me, and knotted a lean cord about my wrists, and presently they had me bound and gagged, and caught up in Dirk's great arms I was borne on down

the bank. Now the moon was clear from the clouds, and as Dirk let me down upon my feet I made out among the reeds a group of fellows about a little boat, and in it a lean little scamp with a clout about his head, stripped to his shirt and breeches, and gripping a pair of oars.

‘In with him!’ ordered Gandy. ‘I’ll cross with the dogs. Scuttle, you rogues. Scuttle! The fool Ainley and his folk are at the Manor, and there’ll be hanging and gaoling for ye, if they get hold of you! Scuttle! Make across the marsh, and for Corbe. Off with you!’

Now from the Manor I heard a sudden outcry, and as the rogues broke and fled, and Gandy pushing off the boat leaped in and we were out upon the waters, I saw them come—Sir Martin rushing down the bank, his fellows racing after, a wild scurry of figures. Sir Martin’s voice thundered after us, ‘Halt! In the King’s name, halt, ye rogues!’

But the whirling wind was up; but the flying clouds obscured the moon; but the darkness fell like a black pall over bank and waters; all form was blotted out.

‘Gandy, you old rogue, I’ll have your neck stretched for this! I’ll smoke you out, Gandy, d’ye mark me. Lay a finger on the lads, and by Gad——’

Sir Martin’s bellow of rage was lost in the roaring wind; else only Gandy’s laughter was in my ears. And the spume of the sea or spray from the wind-lashed waters of the marsh was on my face, and I had a sense that I was

lying against another body—Rob, trussed up as I.

From the first whirl of rage and terror, and hate of the man in whose cruel hands I was again a prisoner, and grief from my separation from her whom in very truth I did believe my mother, I passed into the dull impassive state wherein I had existed much of my time at the Black House. Save that I had hope that Sir Martin Ainley and his folk might wrest us yet from Gandy's keeping.

Staring up in the dark I could make out Gandy perched like a monstrous black crow in the stern of the boat, the while the little fellow tugged at his oars with a strength that showed his lean frame as whipcord and steel. And swiftly across the waters shot the boat through the reeds and to the bank below the cliffs topped by the Black House. Afar sounded the clamour of Sir Martin and his men, the roar of a musket, the crack of pistol shots. We were in Gandy's keeping once again, and the very devil of a flogging was the least of the terrors that awaited us.

As the boat touched the bank, Gandy had leaped out, and the little fellow dropping his oars set his talons on me, and slung me out like a sack of meal. Gandy dragging me to my feet and gripping my shoulder, cried in my ear, to be heard above the wind, tumultuous now, and the thunder of the waters beating on the cliffs of Corbe, 'On, you rogue, on with me!' So forced me forward.

Then through the dark he drew me, going

on confidently below the wall of rock, skirting the road that led up to the gates of the Black House, crossing it, and coming into the full volley of the wind and sea.

Pausing an instant here, he loosed the gag from my mouth, and lit a tiny lantern swinging from his belt. Its glimmer showed me, dazed as I was, that Rob was by me, with the little lean fellow playing guard. The moon had raced out of the clouds. The cliff went black above us. And through the broken rock ahead I saw dimly the rolling of great seas, and the white horses driven shoreward, ere the wind coming in tremendous force flung me back with Gandy against the stones. He pushed me before him then—my hands yet bound behind my back—forward by a stony path hugging the base of the cliff, until we came out above the very sea.

Now, had the slippery path that climbed the cliff face been wholly exposed, we must have been blown from it by the force of the wind; but with the rock fallen from the face it was so hedged in that a wall was between us and the violence of the storm, and so high had we mounted on the shoreward side that we were above the wash of waters breaking at the base, though the surf was flung up, and beating on me like rain, drenched me to the skin. Swiftly then Gandy drew me forward—from the open into a burrow in the cliffs. Even as we entered the gallery, a fellow started up from the blackness and roared. ‘Who’s that? Stand!’

‘Keep a better watch, fool,’ Gandy cried

back, 'or you'll let Ainley and his dogs in on us!' And as the sentinel drew back to let us pass, went on into the cliff. A reek of rotting fish dropped by the sea-fowl stank in my nostrils. The rocks quivered with the shock of the beating sea; and echoed like a drum. On Gandy forced me before him, down the widening galleries. Thrice fellows started up and challenged us, but at his answering oath drew back—else we went unimpeded till I judged we must be nigh the caves under the Black House whence we had heard the sound of voices. Till suddenly the way was blocked, and to my dull eyes, as Gandy's lantern flashed up, I made out a great black door, iron cased, shutting off, I guessed, the way into the smugglers' cave. And Gandy was beating upon the door, and roaring 'Open!' and slowly the door was drawing back; and presently he drove me before him into a great cavern.

For the instant the glare of lights dazzled me. I made out then a vast rocky chamber lit by four ship's lanterns hung on chains from the roof. A great cavern going away into blackness! A cavern piled with contraband, and plunder of wrecked ships. Barrel piled above barrel, hogshead above hogshead. A litter of rusty iron and canvas here and there on the trodden sandy floor, sea chests smashed open, and the contents vomited forth. Reek of tobacco and sea, cloud of tobacco smoke.

'Twas the landlord of *The Gold Scales* had admitted us, and he grinned at me as Gandy pushed me in. Four fellows, pig-tailed sea-

men three, the other a youth, brown-skinned and black-haired, as an Italian, his fine body clad in cambric shirt, and duck trousers, belted about his middle, had been gaming under a lamp. A rum bottle lay empty, a scattered pack of cards in the sand, as though Gandy's return had startled them from their play. And seated on a barrel, his right cheek plastered with a mass of oily cotton, was old Ben, scowling most evilly at me. And I shuddered as I recollected the red iron that had seared his face, and understood the murderous intent in his eye. His fingers played with the knife at his belt. And I knew that Gandy's presence alone stood betwixt me and murder at his hands.

Sick and blinking and shivering from the drenching of the sea, I stood with Rob under the lamp—not daring to meet Mr. Gandy's eyes. Malevolent, and smiling that hateful smile, he looked down upon us—like a vulture by sick beasts.

'Now, my dear pupils,' his voice was silvery, 'what apologies have ye for me, ere I flog ye into penitence?'

And the laughter of the group about us echoed through the great cavern, and old Ben croaked drunkenly, 'Slit the lubbers' throats!'

'Later, maybe, not yet,' purred Mr. Gandy. 'Now, ye dogs, what of the silken bag ye stole, and its contents? Who has them?'

We stood before him as a pair of guilty school-boys before a pedagogue. Indeed, I had a feeling, such the compelling influence of the

man, as if I had wronged him, and merited the punishment. For the moment only! And then I dared fling up my head, and face him fairly.

'We haven't the truck,' I croaked. 'It's not in our keeping—the chart and the gems from the wreck of the galleon on the isle——'

'So you know that much?' His tone was silver, but I saw the greenish light in his eyes as an angered beast's.

'North of New Holland,' I went on. 'Found by the convict 'scaping from Botany Bay! As you said to John Corbe, on the night——'

'Silence!' The word cracked out like a pistol shot. And at the livid rage of him, expressed in blazing eyes and working mouth, and outstretched hand clawing the air, I shrunk from him. Yet, quailing before him, I understood—in that face livid for all its sea bronze, in that great body shrunken and bent—that age had Gandy in its grip at last. Age—and the man was nigh to breaking—decay—death!

'D'ye bark at me, ye dog!' he cried. 'D'ye bark—d'ye dare? Ye're spies—as well as thieves—are ye? I'll teach——' and gripped me by the collar, and struck furiously at me. His hand falling upon my shoulders flung me down, with the shred of my shirt yet in his fingers. 'A rope's end, Carney,' roared he to the little rogue. 'I'll flay him.' But suddenly ceased; his hand outstretched above me, while I lay at his feet. Staggered, and gripped at his breast. A bitter cry came from his throat, he fell back into the arms of his men,

body sagging, lips working horribly, face ghastly and dewed with sweat. Gaping at him, as I rose to my feet, and stood apart with Rob, I saw them bear him to a rock, and prop him there, while the young Italian, snatching up a horn cup, filled it with spirit from a puncheon, and held it to his lips. His breath came in great gasps; his sweat streamed from him; he seemed a dying man. And for the time I did believe that the hand of death was on him, and that there was an end to all his sinning. Silent the pair of us stood and watched, while old Ben, rocking on the barrel, sang drunkenly to himself, and clamorous the fellows busied themselves with Gandy. Watched, while he swallowed down a little of the spirit, this lending him strength; he tore the kerchief from his neck with shaking fingers and mopped his brows and slobbering mouth, remaining all the while as stricken with a palsy, broken and nigh to death. Again the Italian held the cup to his lips; he swallowed greedily; and sat awhile eyes closed, but the colour coming back slowly to his face that had been as a dying man's. And then he lurched to his feet and stood staring before him awhile. And I heard him mutter to himself, 'The hand of God—the hand of God!'

At last he stood erect, himself again, though shaken. He looked on me, and the evil in him burned from his eyes. But he did not lay hand on me, only muttered to his men, 'Take the boys! Hold them fast with the American. To-morrow—if I live—to-morrow I'll

have my toll from their bodies ! To-morrow I'll flay the hides from them. To-night—to-night, I've business in the Black House. Ere Ainley and his hounds break in ! Look to your pistols, Carney'—to the little rogue who had ferried us across the marsh. ' You'll come with me ! Your arm ! '

And muffling about him a cloak which the Italian handed him, Mr. Gandy, weak and shaking yet, passed from the cave, as the seamen dragged us away.

THE young Italian, lighting a lantern from the brazier, led the way for us and our warders. And went ahead singing gaily to himself, whereat old Ben, who had fallen asleep, awoke, and roared a drunken chorus. The pig-tailed seaman who had his hand upon me was a squat fellow, with a battered broad face, and a broken nose—a humorous pair of eyes in relief for his look of villainy. And grinning down at me, as we passed from the cave, and up a flight of stone stairs at the heels of Rob and the others, he growled in my ear—

‘ Sick, the captain was, hey, shipmate ? ’

‘ You heard him,’ I answered. ‘ The hand of God ! ’

‘ The ’and of Gawd ! Oh, aye—and belike ! Sick—as a lad I saw once at Vera Cruz—sickenin’ for Yellow Jack ! You wouldn’t think, would ye, shipmate—it’s Yellow Jack ? And we’re all like to sicken of it, too ? ’

‘ He’s old ! He’s broken ! ’

‘ Not Yellow Jack ! I’ve seen a whole ship’s company sick of it, and only me and the cabin boy left alive ! Died, like as many flies ! “ Old,” ses you. And the “ ’And of Gawd ! ”

ses 'e. Sick 'e was, like a death's 'ead for to see! Saved your starn, his bein' sick, and not fit to flog you. To-morrer, ses he. Aye, an' to-morrer, he'll have ye tied up, and roarin' till yer blood runs! I've sailed with 'im. When 'e ran the *Tortoise* ashore—on the Devil's Horn. Hard put to it—'e was—to get away from the *Neeroos*, King's ship, an' after 'im! 'Twas sink or strike for the old *Tortoise*—full she was, too, with what we'd took—silks and fal-lals for Boston, an' the Governor and his crew never got 'em. Sink 'er we did, an'—I was tellin' yer, though, of the run we made from the *Neeroos*. And 'twas strike or sink. We sunk! On to the Devil's Horn, 'e put 'er! There was rum aboard, and wines——! And the company of the old *Tortoise* drowned as they'd lived! Drunk! 'Cept for the Captain, and Ben, as was 'is bosun, an' me, as was ship's boy. Thirty years gone an' more! 'E's old, the Captain! Seventy, an' odd, should ye say? Aye, belike, seventy an' odd. And the "'And o' Gawd," ses 'e! Sick, and afeard! I'm as feared neither Gawd nor man! Thirty year since—an' odd!

Breaking off, as we came to the head of the stairs—a narrow terrace of rock before an iron-barred grating. Now whatever the manner of men of the Black House centuries past, they had built stoutly, for defence, and for the safe keeping of their enemies. These cliffs beneath the house were burrowed as a very rabbit-warren, washed by the sea, indeed, in

ages past, and by the men of the Black House turned to a vast stronghold and dungeons. This prison that was to be ours was only a shallow cave, but before it they had set this grating of iron bars, locked once, but now secured from opening only by a great block of stone, which took the combined strength of the Italian and the seamen to shift back. At their clamour suddenly a pale face shaped from within against the lantern light, and I could not repress a cry of joy. For it was Erskine, head wrapped in a bloody clout, eyes bright with fever. He had been lying against the grating on a pile of sails, where they had flung him when they had dragged him thither from the Manor, for what purpose I knew not save that Gandy desired him in safe keeping. Yet for the daring that was his own in sparing one who had fought against him bravely, when the men of Corbe might well have murdered him on the marshes.

Erskine, muttering feebly, 'So they have you,' fell back on the canvas, as the seamen thrust us through, and shut the grating on us. And he whispered feebly, 'Ask them to bring us water. I burn with fever.'

Rob, standing against the grating as the fellows rolled back the stone, called to them, 'This gentleman is like to die. Bring us water for him.'

The seaman who had told me the story of Gandy's wrecking of his ship, answered back, 'Oh, aye, and belike a drop of rum. An' a biscuit. Though the Captain gave no orders

sich or to the contrary. What d'ye say, Bill ? ' to his mate.

' Say ! ' Bill grunted. ' Well, if 'e wants it, 'e orter 'ave it, Mat ! Though I don't believe 'e wants it. Water ! ' And Bill spat contemptuously.

Their footsteps echoed down the stair. And we were left caged in that black cavern, and the dark was the dark of the pit, and the air was heavy with foul gases, and a reek as the reek of rotting weed on a sea beach.

Rob, bending over Erskine, was asking, ' Are you much hurt, sir ? Can we do aught for you ? '

' No more than a broken head,' answered Erskine, ' and a sword point through my arm. Well enough ! Have they done you harm, lads ? '

We assured him that we were unhurt. We told him our tale, of the coming of Sir Martin Ainley, and how it chanced that we had fallen into Gandy's hands. And we learned from him that Gandy had struck him down, and that when he had recovered his senses from the blow, he lay a prisoner in the great cavern. ' And what their purpose,' he said, ' I cannot think,—save to have hostages to barter against the King's men. Or that our worthy Gandy in his age stops short of murder, lest the score against him spell entire damnation. I think the rogue is two men—Gandy, who feared not God or man in his youth, and Gandy, grown old and fearing God, not man. Here's our man with water,'

The seaman, Mat, came stumping slowly up the stairway. He brought to us a pail of water and a cup of horn, a rum bottle and some broken biscuit. And growling, 'What cheer, ship-mates?' set down the pail within our reach through the bars, pushed in the cup and the biscuit to us—the bottle he held lovingly ere he drew the cork, and took a swig for himself, ere he thrust it into my hands.

'Jamaica!' he said, wiping his mouth with his paw. 'Old Jamaica, ripe as the Captain. Puts the 'eart into a man. Drink it down! It'll put the 'eart into ye, my lad, an' ye'll need all the 'eart for to-morrer, when the Captain 'as ye tied up, an' the cat's bitin' into ye! Drink it down!' And muttering to himself passed down the stairs once more.

So, while Erskine gulped down cup after cup of the water, I recounted to him the scene in the cave, and the sickness that had come upon Gandy and had saved me from his anger, and of his threats that on the morrow Rob and I were to pay in full.

He said no word, but his thirst assuaged lay back on the pile of canvas, falling almost instantly into a heavy sleep from weakness from the blood he had lost.

For all the weariness that was upon me, I might not sleep. The whirl of happenings those last days, the thought of Mistress Anne, who should be my mother, the bitter sense that happiness had offered, and that the rogues of Corbe had snatched me from it, the certain lively dread of what should come to pass, the

recollection of Gandy's awful face, as a death's head, when he had sought to flog me, were as the very phantoms of fever. And yet there was a solace in it that Erskine and Rob Orme were with me, and that Sir Martin Ainley would not rest till he had laid Gandy and his rogues by the heels, and plucked us from their keeping.

'Rob,' muttered I through the dark to him, lying by my side, 'will Sir Martin ever find us in this place?'

'He'll die in a fit of rage,' he answered, 'if Gandy 'scape him.'

'Just as Gandy nigh died to-night. Did you hear him? "The Hand of God."'

'Aye, I heard him. You had the deuce's own fortune, Jim. You wouldn't have been lying easily here.'

'Or you.'

'No, but his arm might have tired before he flogged me. That morning on the cliffs would have been nothing—for you. What's his purpose with us, d'ye think, Jim? Why, when he runs the risk of hanging should he want us here?'

'Unless he cannot endure that any should have the better of him.'

'I think it so. The very devil of a rogue he's been. Pirate he's been—master of his ship.'

'The *Tortoise*,' I said. 'Aye, the *Tortoise* was his ship! That's why the blue tortoise is tattooed on his arm, and Ben's.' Recounting to him then the yarn old Mat had spun me as we came up the stairway.

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‘ And he’s gone up to the Black House,’ said Rob. ‘ Belike to rescue the lovely Keziah from Sir Martin’s gallantries. She’d run sore peril in such company. Or to blow the house sky high, when Sir Martin and his men arrive. Will Madam remind them of our tale of the ladder down from the bedchamber? And they break into the cave that way—do you think?’

So in conjecture we passed in the dark it might have been an hour, ere Rob was silent and slumbering, And for weariness at length my fevered brain was dulling, and I, too, was dropping asleep by the grating. Suddenly there came a dull roar as distant thunder, and a wild cheer echoing up from the cavern. And sand and little stones fell from the roof above us. The three of us were on our feet on the instant, and clinging to the iron bars. Still the clamour rose from the cave—drunken cheering, wild laughter. Gandy’s voice echoed above all. The crash and roar of falling stone and timber seemed to sweep down into the cave below us. And an end to the cheering and laughter, and a tumult of wild cries.

‘ What’s happening?’ I called to Rob Orme. ‘ What’s come to pass?’

‘ I think—I think—an end to the Black House. Gandy’s set a match in a powder-barrel. God help Sir Martin and his folk!’

FOR the while we remained by the grating seeking to learn what passed in the cave below. But, when the smugglers' cheering died, they fell to silence and no sound came up, save only the eternal roll of the sea, and the wash of waters against the cliff. Nor, though I stayed wakeful, when Rob and Erskine had fallen asleep, and though I strained my ears, heard I aught save the occasional mutter of voices, and once the rolling of a barrel over the shingle. At last for all my fear and grief I slept as they.

I was awakened by the flash of a lantern on my face, and for the moment believing that I was yet in the Black House and that Mr. Gandy was staring down at me, I feigned to sleep still. But the seaman Mat roared through the grating. 'Tumble up! D'ye hear me! Tumble up! Captain's orders. All hands on deck!'

Mat and his mate Bill were rolling back the stone from the grating, while the little fellow, Carney, held a lantern. And shivering, yawning, rubbing our eyes, we stood up in our prison.

Now this Carney was a fellow of middle age, red polled, pallid of face and green of eye.

He was clad soberly in homespun, his throat was cased in a black stock, his linen neat and starched. He resembled an attorney's clerk, standing there shabby and cadaverous; but he wore about his middle a leather belt, wherein a pistol was stuck—he held a second pistol in his hand.

'It's well that you should know,' said Carney in a soft voice, 'that I'll shoot on sight, if you try any tricks on me. Such are Mr. Gandy's orders to me, Erskine! You'll do wisely to be reasonable——' He had a curious habit of simple speech—fitting his manner of dress, and the mildness of his demeanour that only his evil eyes belied. Erskine gave him not a word in answer, but, when the gate swung back, stepped out, and yet weak from his hurts, staggered slowly down the stair, Rob and I following at his heels, and the three coming after.

The lanterns burning in the cave revealed a scene that showed preparation for flight. Sea chests open, with garments and such stuff as mariners treasure up from voyages to foreign lands lying loose and scattered in the sand; ten or so of the Corbe folk, youths for most, busied, some in rolling down barrels whither the cold sea air blowing in and the wash of waters betokened the entrance to the cave, the rest in a group about the brazier, feeding on biscuit and bacon, while Mr. Gandy, ghastly pale still, perched upon a sea chest, very much as a black crow. Of Ben I saw nothing, but his voice bellowed up from below,

as if he gave orders for the lowering of the barrels. As we came blinking into the light Mr. Gandy smiled frostily upon us.

'So, Mr. Erskine, so, my pupils,' says he. 'You slept well, I trust.'

Erskine, regarding him haughtily, gave him never a word.

'And are rested, and fit for fresh fatigue,' proceeded Mr. Gandy. 'We leave this place within a few minutes. Eat—the fare is poor; such as it is you are heartily welcome.'

And signing to the young Italian, bade him supply us with biscuit and bacon. Erskine, turning his back deliberately on Gandy, sat down by the brazier, the two of us standing by him. My mind was filled with new conjecture at Mr. Gandy's words. I took it that the smugglers' ship whose lights at sea we had marked from the windows of the Black House was lying in some sheltered cove, and that Mr. Gandy and his rogues proposed to board her—my conjecture was why he should carry us with him, for such was his apparent purpose.

We had scarce the time to swallow down a little food, and a mug of black coffee, ere a loud call came echoing up into the cave. Mr. Gandy, wrapping his cloak about him, and pressing his hat down over his brows, strode away in answer. 'Bring them along!' he ordered over his shoulder to the seamen.

They gripped every man his musket or his pistol, and buckled his cutlass, and stood as guard about us, the seaman Bill bidding us

surlily to 'Look alive!' and so they marched us down after Mr. Gandy. Now, for the lanterns and the pale light of dawn coming up through the mouth of the cave, I saw the barrels of powder open, and a grey train laid the way down, understanding that it was not Gandy's purpose that all the smuggled liquor and tobacco and ship's stores should fall into the hands of Sir Martin, if he came that way, but that he would blow down the rocks from the entrance of the cave, and seal it for ever.

So we descended from the great cave into the light of dawn. We were looking out from a vast archway shut off from full view at sea by masses of rock, fashioned by the waves into fantastic shapes. Above the pillars of rock the sea-fowl flew ghostly in the pale light of dawn; sea-fowl were wheeling and shrilling in a cloud about the great arch; beyond the rocks I could make out the tumbling grey sea, and the white shower of spray, as the waters broke with a sullen sound against the cliffs. And riding off shore a brig, faint as the *Flying Dutchman* in the dawn, no lamps burning. But of Sir Martin Ainley and his men along the cliffs by which we had come in the night no sound. And drawn up on the shingle below us I saw three boats, one pushing off with a load of barrels, a second grouped about by a half-dozen of the smugglers, Carney directing them; in the third boat no one as yet. Now if we had thought of resistance against the thirty and odd rogues about us, the notion

must have been driven speedily from our heads, for the seaman Mat, marching down by my side, suddenly plucked a pistol from his belt, and cocking it clapped it to my ear, vowing with a foul oath that if I sought to trick them he'd blow out my brains. So, too, his fellows covered Erskine and Rob, so helpless we marched down the last steps from the cave to the shingle by the boats.

Mr. Gandy, leaping into the third boat, bade the three of us follow and seat ourselves in the stern, the seamen Mat and Bill, and a young fisherman, followed after, and set themselves to the oars, the big fellow, Dirk, pushing the boat off with a mighty shove, leaped in after us, and fell with the rest to pulling out. Mr. Gandy sat at the helm, his pistol ready on his knee.

'Don't seek to hail your friends ashore, Mr. Erskine,' said Mr. Gandy mildly. And played suggestively with the trigger. But, indeed, Erskine, for weakness from his hurts and loss of blood, was not in a fit case for attempting rescue. He had sunk down between us and lay ghastly and leaden-eyed, in a stupor.

Out through the wash into the cove; out with the sea-birds shrilling above us! Out with the rollers coming now to break us against the cliff, or the monstrous, jagged rocks that held the full wash of the sea from the smugglers. The spray broke over us in showers. The seamen struggling at the oars cursed and groaned for the force of the rollers. The wind had

dropped in the night, and the sea was fallen to sullen surge, yet at the force of the breakers we were nigh forced in under the very cliffs. Once we shipped a sea that might have swamped us, whereat Mr. Gandy cried harshly to Rob and me to bale out the boat with the tin cans lying at our feet; and dully we fell to our task. Now as we drew out of the cove, and met the full force of the rollers, our boat seemed no more than a bobbing cork, and our drowning inevitable. In the clear light I saw the cliffs of Corbe above us; and when we dipped in the trough the rollers looked like the cliffs—grey walls of water tumbling to engulf us in their ruin. Gandy's voice shouting orders to his men rang out like a trumpet call. He had dropped his pistol; he was giving both hands now to the helm; his hat was blown from his head, his white hair blew out from his livid face, his eyes were alight with mastery and command. Save for his voice the air was filled with the thunderous beat of the surf on the cliffs, like the roll of great drums, and the shriek of sea-fowl whirling in clouds above us.

Out! We were riding high on the crest of a vast wave. Pausing in my task of baling, I saw the brig it might be a half-mile from us, creeping as nigh to the coast as it dared, and at the sight of it Mr. Gandy sent over the waters a cheer of triumph. Now the rowers fell hard to the oars, and the spray nigh swamped us, and Mr. Gandy bellowed frantic orders at Rob and me, if we showed signs of flagging at our task.

And we were beating out and out towards the brig—once from the crest of a wave I saw the boat that had put out ahead of us; once staring back I made out through the sea spume the cliffs of Corbe, but where the chimney stacks of the Black House should have topped the buttress of rock, I could see nothing. Mr. Gandy understood my thoughts, for he burst into cackling laughter. And above the beat of oars and splash of the seas his voice rang in my ears—

‘Do you look for the Black House—my house? There’s naught else but a heap of stones in the green cup where the Black House stood for all the years. It’s a tomb for the fool Ainley and your friends, you dogs! A tomb! A warning to all meddling justices. Under the stones they’ll lie till Judgment Day!’ And shook his fist with a bitter malediction back at the cliffs.

But on the cliffs it seemed to me I saw the moving figures of men, in the sunlight the gleam of a musket barrel, the scarlet of a coat. And in spite of Mr. Gandy’s declaration that under the ruins of the Black House lay the stout bluff gentleman, I did my preceptor the honour to credit him with lying. Observing the figures on the cliff I fell to wondering for the last boat and Carney and its crew and the barrels of powder in the smugglers’ cave, and the train laid ready for the match. But the menace in Mr. Gandy’s tone, ‘Look to your baling, -dolt!’ set me to my task again,

So in wretched plight, drenched with spray, numbed for the chill of the morn, though the sun was glittering now upon the waters, I baled on dully for it might have been an hour. All this while Erskine lay in a half stupor ; all this while the rogues toiled at the oars, and Mr. Gandy tended the helm. Suddenly looking up as a hoarse voice hailed us over the waters, I saw with a start that the brig which had been holding off shore awaiting the boats from the cave was bearing down upon us. A little brig, with a great sea-hawk gilded for figurehead, slowly beating down towards us, for the wind had dropped to the merest light breeze, and the sea was falling. Men were clustered upon her deck ; men in the rigging ; presently as she was nigh us, and so riding lightly in the wash of the sea, a rope came whirling down through the air into Gandy's hands.

And the brig hove to and we drew in under her side ; and a rope ladder was dropped down towards us, now within easy reach, now high above our heads as the brig rolled sluggishly. While thus we held alongside, Mr. Gandy snarled to Rob and me, 'Get ready to go aboard ! Grip the ladder when it drops. Grip the ladder ! You first !' to me.

Sick for fear lest I should miss my grip, and be cast to drown in the sea, I stood up shakily in the boat ; watched till the ladder swung down towards me, and gripped it high. I swung up with it, but I clung like a leech to the rung, set my feet on the lowest, and drew

myself up. The landlord of *The Gold Scales*, leaning over the side, caught me by my jacket and dropped me like a sack of meal on the deck.

WE came aboard the *Sea Hawk* in security. And we were beating offshore to pick up the last boatload from the cave. In the confusion of our coming, and the picking up of our boat, the master and the men of the brig paid Erskine and Rob and me scant heed, tumbling Erskine on to the deck after they had hauled him aboard by a rope, and leaving him lying there. The American was ghastly pale, and looking like to die. Yet for a while Rob and I, exhausted from our toil in the boat, lay by him, weak and gasping, and gave him no heed, until Mat, good-humoured enough, although he had sailed with Gandy on his ship the *Tortoise*, came stumping up with a mug of grog, and handed it to me. 'Get some o' that down his throat,' says Mat. 'He's looking as sick as if he'd croak. Grog's bin the ruin of many a good man, but it's bin the savin' of plenty more.'

I held the cup to Erskine's lips, and trickled a little of the spirit down his throat. So potent a draught was this that it nigh choked him, and coughing and gasping he sat up, and blinked about him. And, 'Where the deuce are we?' he asked.

I answered, 'Safe for the time. Drink this!' and held the cup again to his lips.

He gulped down then a mouthful of the rum, and through his weakness the strength of the dram overpowered him, for he lay back upon the deck like a dead man, though colour was flowing to his lips and cheeks. And I had time then to look about me, and to observe the fortune of the third boat.

Tending Erskine I had not noticed the growing excitement on the deck of the *Sea Hawk*. The fellows who had come off safely from the cave and the crew of the smuggler alike were swarming in the rigging, and clustered at the ship's side staring shorewards, and their clamour alternated from cheering to menace and savage imprecation according to the fortunes of a contest that was off shore. Staggering with Rob across the reeling deck, and clinging to the bulwarks, I saw that the last boat was making out from the rocks for the brig, but that another boat was coming up from Corbe, rowed with lusty strokes, to intercept its passage. Aye, and I saw in this great boat a dozen or so of red-coats—King's men—and the sunlight gleaming from the barrels of their muskets, and with them in the stern-sheets a stout figure, whom I took to be Sir Martin Ainley. Now high on the crest of a wave, now in the trough of the sea, the smugglers' boat, deeply laden with barrels from the cave, came on towards us so slowly that the second boat must clearly cut it off. Mr. Gandy, glass at eye, was standing close by us—so intent on the chase that he

did not notice us—by him a short, dark-bearded fellow, whom for his blue, gold-braided coat I took to be the master of the *Sea Hawk*. Mr. Gandy turns upon this fellow, and mutters, 'They'll have her unless we blow them to the devil. Clear the gun.'

'Not I,' the other answered carelessly. 'I've run enough risk for you and your fellows, Mr. Gandy. I'll not risk bringing a King's ship down on me.'

'I tell you, Banks——'

'See here, Mr. Gandy,' Banks cut him short, 'there's one master aboard this ship. That's me!' And turned upon his heel and walked off.

Mr. Gandy, cadaverous and livid of face, slung his cloak about him, and stood an instant peering after him. And there was menace in his look, and in the fumbling of his fine white hand at his waist, as if he sought a pistol. But mastering himself he laughed, and turned back to peer shorewards.

On that instant I saw a burst of red flame from the cave. I saw great rocks flung high, and the cliff face slide suddenly into the sea. The waters flew up in a white cloud; the sea-fowl went whirling; and a pillar of smoke blotted the rocks from my sight. Presently like a clap of thunder the sound of the explosion from the cave reached the brig. Aye, and that very instant the King's boat shot athwart the smugglers' boat; and the muskets flashed in the sun—no more I saw, for Mr. Gandy had whirled upon us, and the demon of rage possessing him, looked from his eyes.

‘What do ye here?’ barked he. ‘What do ye here? You’d look on brave fellows done to death by a dolt of a justice, and a pack of red-coats? You would——’ And beckoned with shaking claw to the seaman Mat standing by. ‘Get these rogues below,’ he ordered. ‘See that they’re kept secure! You’ll pay if they sheer off! With your back.’ So he marched off along the deck to the master’s cabin. Mat, bidding a couple of the crew take up Erskine, growled to Rob and me to come after him, and look lively, and gripping the pair of us by the collars led us below. By the gangway he brought us stumbling down into a little cabin foul with bilge, and murky from a dirty port-hole, having in it only a couple of sea-chests, a hammock slung, a bunk with a tumbled pile of blankets.

‘There ye are, me hearties,’ said Mat cheerfully. ‘There ye are! Fit for King George himself an’ the Prince an’ all the rest of the Royal family. D’ye like it? No? Not that it matters a curse, for here the Captain ’e says you’re to be kept, and Captain’s orders is Captain’s orders, or it’s rank mutiny on the high seas. Stow ’im there!’ pointing to the bunk, as the seamen bearing Erskine followed at our heels into the little black cabin. ‘Easy! The feller’s head’s broken, an’ ’e’s as sick as ever a dog. Easy!’ all the while spreading out the blankets over the straw pallet until the seamen tumbled Erskine into the bunk and stamped out of the cabin.

Mat, ramming down the tobacco in his pipe

with a little finger, paused to point the stem at us, as if for emphasis. 'Captain's hisself again,' said he. 'Treat, ain't it, to 'ear 'im curse, as if he was aboard the old *Tortoise*! Looked at you, 'e did, as I saw 'im look once at the Barbadoes to a son of a gun as spoke back to 'im. Young feller, 'e was, an' new to the Captain. Tied up 'e was, an' 'is back as a bit o' red meat before e' found out who was master o' the ship. Seems to me that's what e's savin' up for you! Seein' you spyin' round, an' ten good fellers like to be sunk by your friends! Didn't like it, the Captain didn't, as any with 'arf an eye could make out!' Pausing as sudden across the waters came the rattle of muskets, and answering shrieks and cheers.

'Murder's what I call it,' said Mat, as he banged the door to, and shot the bolt. 'Murder on the high seas,' and stumped away.

So Rob and I were left alone with Erskine, lying now like a log—alone in the foul little cabin, lit only through the blurred circle of the port-hole. And Rob, leaning back on a sea-chest, burst suddenly into bitter laughter. And 'Jim,' cries he, 'here's a pretty pass! We get away from the Black House, for all its bolts and bars; we risk breaking our necks in the caves of Corbe, and drowning in the fens! And here we are aboard the *Sea Hawk*, with Gandy stumping the deck over our heads, and thinking out how he may exact full reckonin' out of our bodies! Why, Jim, we've the deuce's own fortunes, and Heaven itself directs the destinies of our guardians. And, Jim,

I've come to such an ebb of fortune, that I care not a snap of the fingers what the end of it's to be. Plank or yard-arm, or a mere rope's end. What's it matter, Jim, when all's said and done?

'Jim'—as the spray splashed suddenly against the port-hole—'we're putting out to sea! Old Sir Martin's blown the boat's crew to the devil!'

NOW, for days thence, we were held close prisoners on the *Sea Hawk*. Erskine, indeed, was removed from our company by Mr. Gandy's orders—though whether because he was like to die from his hurts, or because Mr. Gandy feared his association with us, or purposed to end his business by dropping him overboard, we could not conjecture. For towards night Mr. Gandy himself came down into the cabin, attended by the seaman Mat,—came, looking very bent and white in the dim light of the lantern he carried—so sick still from his seizure in the cave that, though I believe he had contemplated the deuce's own flogging for the pair of us, he employed his cane only to support his feeble body, till he dropped wearily on to the sea-chest, and peered at us dully. And not a word said Mr. Gandy to us, and not a word said we, scowling at him. But he noted that Erskine was in a high fever, babbling in his bunk, and, motioning with his cane to Mat, Mr. Gandy muttered, 'The fellow's like to die on our hands. Move him out of this. He's a brave rogue and deserves to live. Get some of your shipmates and carry him into the air.'

So, when Mat and a couple of smugglers had lifted Erskine out of the bunk, and carried him away wrapped in his blanket, Mr. Gandy tottered after them.

Three days—locked for the most in the little reeking cabin, taking our meals there, scant meals for the first two days, for we were deucedly sick, from the sea, and could scarce move out of our blankets. At night, for an hour or more, we were allowed out on deck, watched ever by the seaman Mat, and able to make out nothing, save in the chance shining of the moon through the clouds we saw the tumbling waters all about us. But we were beating only up and down the coast, it seemed, for on the third morn when we woke, the brig lay at anchor, and when we were allowed on deck that morning, we found ourselves in a little cove nigh land-locked, the cliffs about us much as the cliffs of Corbe, and ashore only the smoke of a wretched group of huts, a few boats drawn up on the beach, all as if we lay off Corbe. And we saw in a boat, pulling shorewards, Mr. Gandy and a half-dozen or so of the Corbe folk; and were yet conjecturing whether Banks was landing the smugglers, now that they were out of immediate reach of the King's justice, when Mat scurried the pair of us below once more. And to our eager questions for Erskine, he told us only that the fellow's hurts were mending, but when we asked whether we were to be put ashore at this place, and were we yet in England or off the coast of France, he laid his finger

aside his nose, grinned at us, spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice, but answered not a word. Long we debated what now should happen to us, passing the day wretchedly enough, until, the night dropping, the door was unlocked for us, and we mounted to the deck. But we stayed only a brief while in the air, for, as we paced to and fro, we chanced suddenly upon old Ben beneath a lantern, and the wicked glare of his eye, when he saw me, and his foul oath, and his threat as he pointed to his seared and swollen cheek that he would do for me yet, drove us to the security of the cabin. All the next day the brig lay at anchor in the cove, and till nigh the next evening we were held prisoner. Mat, coming then, ordered us off to the master's cabin.

'The captain's got company,' vouchsafed he. 'Friends of yours.'

A precious company was seated about the table in the master's cabin. The light of the reeking lamp showed us Mr. Gandy, pale and cadaverous, John Corbe in his riding jacket, and to complete the circle of friends of mine, my beloved guardian, Mr. Josiah Pounds, wearing as sour an expression as ever graced the withered features of his sister Lavinia. There was with them a stout fellow of middle age, his face as large as a large white moon, his eyes small and furtive behind their spectacles, his suit of a respectable black, his linen of a glossy whiteness. On espying this fellow Rob stopped dead, and centred his gaze upon him. At which the stout man folded his hands over

his capacious stomach, and blinked benevolently upon Rob. And I guessed him to be the sanctimonious fellow Eggleston, who had wedded Rob's kinswoman, and had placed him in Gandy's hands, while the pair of them lived fatly on the Orme estate.

Mr. Gandy wore as bland an expression as on the day when my guardian had handed me over to his keeping at the Black House.

'Ah! James, Rob'—thus Mr. Gandy. 'Here are your rogues, gentlemen.'

Whereat the stout fellow in black rolled up his eyes in a manner devout and displeasing. 'Ah! Robert, Robert,' he sighed, 'what would your father and my friend have thought of this? Oh, this is a sad, sad story your preceptor has been telling us!'

'Had my father but known,' retorted Rob, 'he'd have wondered as much as I that he should ever have appointed such rogues as you and your wife—I take it she's your wife—as guardians to his son.'

'Rob,' protested Mr. Gandy mildly, 'my dear lad!'

'I fear,' said Eggleston, regretfully, 'you have spared the rod, and——'

'Gandy,' my guardian broke in roughly, 'I've not the time to waste on folly of this kind. This fellow, I take it, handed the boy over to your care for a clear and definite purpose. To be rid of him.'

'Sir,' protested Eggleston, 'you do me a very grave injustice.'

'There's no need to make-believe with me!'

my guardian snarled. 'I know something of the history. This fellow'—pointing his fat fingers at me, and eyeing me malevolently—'is a rogue and the son of a rogue.'

'You lie!' I muttered, flinging back my head. 'I am the son of Roger Corbe. You know it! That man John Corbe knows it!'

At which John Corbe flung himself back in his chair and laughed contemptuously. 'These pupils of yours, Gandy, do you credit!' he sneered.

Mr. Pounds, now purple with rage, started from his seat, and made round the table, as if to fall on me with all his old vigour, but Mr. Gandy, striking his hand violently upon the table, cried in a high and strident voice, 'Sit down, Pounds, and listen to me! Hark to me, Corbe, hark you!' with a contemptuous gesture to Eggleston, who, white and quivering as a jelly, turned up his eyes, raised his hands as if in prayer, and groaned.

Mr. Gandy was on his feet, a huge figure yet, imperious still, dominating those weaker rogues about him. 'There is no need,' he said, 'for keeping up this folly of pretence. There is no need to purport that I be other than I am, or that you wear your several masks—gentleman, respectable attorney, prosperous merchant of John Company! No need!'

'I'll not sit here!' roared Corbe, lurching to his feet.

'Sit down, Corbe! Sit down! You stay and listen to me, or this night Roger Corbe's son goes back to Roger Corbe's widow!' And at

the menace of his tone John Corbe, who had nigh reached the door, stood still, and at the wave of Gandy's hand slunk back to his seat, snarling like a beaten cur.

'Roger Corbe's son!' muttered Gandy, leaning over the table, eyes burning, hands playing upon the board. 'Heir to Corbe. And this other lad, Robert Orme, whose patrimony, Eggleston, you and your wife are dissipating. And you, Pounds, who've taken Corbe's pay these years to keep Roger Corbe's son from his inheritance. Why there's enough in this, and this, to send the three of you to Newgate; ship you overseas as felons! Felons!'

'Well for you, Gandy,' gasped John Corbe, 'you who should have swung at Execution Dock! You—pirate, murderer!'

'At least you bark, John Corbe,' cries Gandy, 'while these curs whine and snarl. All this I've been—gentleman of fortune! But if I hang at your word, I know enough to gaol or hang the three of you! Yet wanting you, as you have need of me. Now hark you, John Corbe! You had a tale from me at the Black House of treasure, treasure that lies in the galleon on the isle north of New Holland! Treasure of gold and silver and many precious gems! Treasure I'd have as my last quest upon earth! I tell you, Corbe, and you, that I'm not for dying in my bed ashore; that the sins that have been mine, and the desire that has been mine from my youth up, are mine unto the end of my days. I'm for the sea again—and the sea calls me as the Wanderer of old!

And this treasure, is it not worth the quest of such a man as I am? Is it not worth the thought of covetous rogues as ye? Gold! And precious cups of ruby, glass and gold—gems, such as that rosary of pearls and gold these young rogues stole from me! Aye, and they stole the chart that was drawn in blood; the chart, I take it, is in Mistress Corbe's keeping—a brave lady, a fair lady, worthier of the Corbes than you, John Corbe! Now, hear me, I go sailing in this ship! It is mine for the buying from the fellow Banks! Victualled it soon shall be for a cruise—it has as pretty a crew of rogues as ever sailed with me! Five thousand guineas—half from you, Pounds, half from you, Eggleston; and from you, Corbe, having nothing, nothing!’

‘My dear sir!’ Eggleston gasped.

‘Not a penny from me!’ snarled Pounds.

‘And yet I think you'll pay,’ Gandy went on, mockery on his lips, his eyes burning. ‘Oh, yes, yes, yes, you'll pay! Down to the last penny piece! I give you two days to have the money here from London. Those two days and no money, and Roger Corbe's son and Robert Orme's son come unto their own, and I go sailing to France. And you, gentlemen, I leave you to conjecture what of you!’

Livid they glared at him, as he sped on.

‘Now for the bargain and the advantage to you. This ship mine, and these lads go with me overseas! And they come not back again to trouble your peace. I promise you, they come not back! But if I return, if ever I

return—never, unless I set my fingers on the treasure of the isle—you shall be repaid to the last piece, and a third of the value of this freight that should have gone to the King of Spain centuries ago. Gold and gems, gentlemen, gold and gems, such a freight as never an Indiaman bore to your company, Eggleston, to this lad's company. And on an isle that no man, save a dead man, has set foot upon. On an island north of New Holland. Thither goes the *Sea Hawk*, for, though the chart is no longer mine, I tell you that I have engraved it on the tablets of my mind, so oft I've looked on, picturing that treasure, drawn by it as by the lodestone! Thither I sail, whether you pay or no. And if ye pay, the lads sail with me, and if you do not pay, still I sail, and the lads stay in England! Your answer!'

They answered nothing. John Corbe sat scowling, arms folded across his breast; Pounds, with shaking fingers, poured himself a dram; while Eggleston stared up to Heaven, his hands clasped as if he besought Providence to intercede for him. But Gandy dominated them, Gandy's will compelled. I saw it on fat old Pounds' congested face; in Eggleston's feeble look and dropping lip; on John Corbe's grinning mouth, and in his shifty eyes.

'I sail!' cried Mr. Gandy, with triumphant laughter. 'I sail, and the lads sail with me!'

SAFE hid from King's ship and King's justice, we lay a week in the cove. And all this time we passed, Rob and I, locked in the cabin, or pacing the deck, under the ever-watchful eyes of Mat, or at times fishing from the side of the brig with the lines he wove for us. A dreary time, I promise you, for the thought of the scene in the cabin, between Gandy and our enemies—his undertaking to them that we should never return; their ultimate acceptance of his offer, and their promise to pay into his hands five thousand guineas for the buying off of Banks, master of the ship. And I mourned, too, that having, by a trick of destiny, come to my father's home and met my mother, I was torn again from her arms into the keeping of her enemies, and that, though Sir Martin Ainley and she sought the kingdom, end to end, she should never know my fate. Now, Sir Martin, Mat told us, had taken prisoners the crew of the third boat, a half of the smugglers had fallen to the fire of the muskets, and the remainder were, by now, clapped in Newgate. But of

Erskine we saw nothing all this time,—he was very sick, Mat gave us to understand, and like to die.

I promise you we sought escape. What chance had we from the constant watching of Gandy's rogues on the deck, or from the little cabin, with the door locked fast upon us? Only pacing the deck we saw the stir and bustle of provisioning the ship for Gandy's mad voyage overseas—fruit, vegetables, water, and barrels of junk, salt fish, borne down to the shore by lumbering waggons, and brought off to the *Sea Hawk* by her crew. On the third day Mr. Gandy was rowed ashore, with Banks sitting glum and dour beside him; and Mr. Gandy remained away all that day, returning at evening alone. And by his laughter, and the wild mood that possessed him as he lurched into the master's cabin, I understood, as Mat scurried us below, that the precious attorney, Pounds, and Eggleston, worthy merchant, had paid their guineas into his hands, and Banks had received his price, and Mr. Gandy was once more the master of his own ship. And, on the following day, he paid off all of the smugglers' crew, who went ashore uproarious, leaving to man the brig fellows from Corbe, young fishermen for the most, who, having turned smugglers, and for their attack on the Manor, had put their necks within reach of the hangman. With them, then, old Ben as boatswain, Mat and the seaman Bill, and the big fellow, Jonas Wall, who had been landlord of *The Gold Scales*.

But there came off a boat on the following day, wherein sat three fellows—a lank, dark rogue of middle age, in the rig of a ship's officer, a younger man, with sun and sea tanned face, yellow curling hair, and sea-blue eyes, the third none other than John Corbe, with a variety of chests, as if he would make the voyage with us. Before all this company, assembled in Mr. Gandy's cabin, we were paraded, Rob and I, on the eve of our departure. And the lank, dark fellow, we learnt, was Mr. Ezra Oakes, first mate of the *Sea Hawk*,—I took it that he was some rogue with whom Gandy had had dealings in the past; the younger fellow, who seemed ill-fitted for such company, Mr. Richard Lester, the second mate. And that he was not yet of their confidence was borne out by Gandy's ordering him on deck to take aboard the last of the stores, and have all trim for our departure.

So they sat, the three of them, smoking about the table, decanters of wine and brandy and a dish of raisins before them; John Corbe looking pinched and ill at ease, Oakes dark and saturnine, Mr. Gandy a very handsome picture of a gentleman, with his fine, white hands, his silver hair, his suit of nautical blue, gold braided, and his starched linen.

'I've sent for ye,' said Mr. Gandy, poking his pipe at us, 'to have ye know there'll be no idlers aboard my ship. Cabin boy, you,' to me, 'cook's boy, you,' to Rob, 'with the assurance of a rope's end well plied, if you're idle. And knowing you for rogues, I have a

notion that the rope's end will curl about ye both, ere the morrow's out.'

We answered him not a word, knowing ourselves helpless at his hands, having agreed between us to make the best of ill fortune, and, if we had but the merest chance at any port of call, to cut a dash for freedom.

'You will treat my guest, Jim,' said Gandy, 'my friend and guest, Mr. Corbe, with respect and deference. You will be obedient to his least wish or command. Kinsman of yours he may be——'

'Enough of that, Gandy,' Corbe broke in angrily.

'You will put that out of your mind, Jim,' Gandy proceeded smoothly, 'understanding that on your good behaviour depends your treatment on the cruise. Whether I set you aboard another ship, whether by all precedent you be marooned on such an isle as this we seek.' His hands spread out upon the table a chart, which, I took it, reproduced from his recollection the convict's chart of the galleon's isle. 'Now, of this American.'

'My wish is, Gandy, that you set the dog ashore,' muttered John Corbe.

'To wed a very charming kinswoman of yours,' purred Mr. Gandy. 'Or understanding our purpose, to bring a King's ship sailing after us. That would be wise, Corbe.'

'There are means of stopping the dog's barking,' his hand spilling his wine.

'Nay, I have a fancy to carry the American with me. He is a brave fellow, and if he be

an enemy, interest may make him our friend.'

'With these boys and with the American, Gandy, what's to be the end of this cruise?'

'Mr. Corbe, when I sailed, I had no thought for the end of the adventure. Pursuit of the adventure was all to me. So in this hunt of ours for the isle with the wrecked treasure-ship, I care not for the treasure, or the spending of the treasure, only for the search! I have no care whether I set foot again on English soil, whether my bones lie fathoms deep, or bleaching on the sands. I have no care!'

'You're old, Gandy. I'm young, still. I have a mind yet to enjoy.'

'You have yet the choice of all Europe. What's England to you? Your share of treasure, Corbe, will make you rich as all your life you've plotted, planned to be. Are you rich yet? Have you ever had enough to lead the life you would have led?'

'But to be rich in England,' he muttered, red wine spurting over his fingers like blood.

'Tush, man! I promise you that the American shall never trouble your enjoyment. This I promise you, as I have promised you that Roger Corbe's son here shall never come into his patrimony. And can you choose, John Corbe?'

He answered nothing, but his look was livid, and he swallowed down his wine, and filling up his glass again, again spilled it on the table.

Mr. Gandy set a little silver whistle to his lips, and at his pipe came Mat, to whom Gandy says, 'Bring Mr. Erskine here.'

He came presently, leaning on the seaman's arm. He was very thin and pale, his beard was grown ; the wound upon his head seared his scalp as a livid brand. At the sight of him Rob and I could not repress our joy, but caught his hands, and so beside him stood facing the trio at the table.

'A pretty promise this for the voyage,' cries John Corbe savagely. 'Gandy, you carry this fellow with you, and your plans for sure miscarry.'

'Mr. Erskine,' says Gandy politely. 'I beg that you'll sit down and join us in a glass of wine. We have a matter we would discuss with you.'

I had expected Erskine contemptuously to refuse. But his limp hands dropped ours ; with dragging footsteps he moved forward to the table. He slipped then into a chair, and with shaking fingers he took the glass of wine Gandy poured for him.

'Mat,' orders Gandy, 'take these fellows, and hold them under lock and key till the morning. And rig them out afresh, for their rags are a scandal to the ship's company.'

So we were hustled from the cabin by old Mat. So were locked again below. And an hour thence while we yet debated our fortunes, the tramp of footsteps, the rattle of the chain, told us that the crew weighed anchor, and that under cover of the night the *Sea Hawk* would slip away from the coast of England.

NOW I hasten on with my tale—of the sailing of the *Sea Hawk* overseas in search of treasure on the isle north of New Holland. And I do believe that not the credulity of Mr. Gandy sent him overseas on a wild adventure, not belief in the story of the convict fugitive from His Majesty's penal settlement at Botany Bay, not the sight of the jewels the rogue might well have prigged in London, but the tameless, tireless spirit that was his, that drove him as the Wanderer of old, or as the Dutchman overseas—ever overseas. For although Mr. Gandy was old in body, his spirit might not rest,—I have a sense now at this hour, when the storm beats without, and goes on down to the tormented sea, that his great voice shouts with the tempest, and that his evil soul flies overseas with the storm. That voice as a mighty trumpet in the storm, such storm as smote us off the English coast, such storm as we encountered in the Bay of Biscay, such storm as drove us from the coasts of Africa across the leagues of ocean to New Holland. I mark him now—on a wild night—a black cloud rolling up to

blot the tropic moon full-faced and having in it both the colour of blood and the green of the sea across its own pale gold—the stars of the same wild hues, the heaven above us an immense vault lit by blue-green light—the great wave coming onwards. And over the roar of wind and wave, commingling as the storm bursts from the cloud, the voice yet dominant, and the frame of Simon Gandy dominant upon the reeling decks. The moon is lost, and the stars quenched, and all is blackness, till the lightning leaps in a jagged fork out of the murk, and all sound ends in a pandemonium of thunder, wind and sea.

Now I do believe that the villainies of the Black House were no part of this man, that his life ashore wasted itself in wrecking, smuggling, torture of the pair of us, given over to his care by those who would be rid of us. That such a man was the old Flying Dutchman, that such a man as this would fling defiance to the face of heaven. For on this voyage of the *Sea Hawk* overseas to the golden isle—the ten months of our sailing from the English coast, the days we spent at the isle of St. Jago, at Rio de Janeiro, and at the Cape of Good Hope, to the end of our voyaging—the man did us no hurt. Nay, I was about him constantly as his cabin boy, and took no more from him than a cuff or a spank, were I lazy or lubberly to his thinking; indeed, his absolute authority alone over his ship's company saved me from the malice of John Corbe, or old Ben, scarred horribly with the iron that I had planted in

his face that night at the Manor House. And in time I came no longer to fear the execution on us of his promise to the three rogues that Rob and I should never return, believing that he had made the promise only that he might have the ship, and go on this treasure quest across the seas, not caring for the event but only for the adventure. For the most he conducted himself as any master of an English ship, giving himself wholly heart and mind to the navigation of the brig and to the comfort of his crew, and I tell you that with a liberal allowance of grog, a sufficiency of fruit, of which we took in great abundance at the ports of call, the seamen fared fatly. And out of these young fishermen he and his mates Oakes and young Lester schooled as able a crew as ever sailed under Gandy's command. Rogues, adventurers, sons of a race that had lived by smuggling, wrecking on the wild coast of Corbe—all this; yet dominated by Gandy and his mates, and held by a rigid discipline, so that not the poisonous influence of old Ben prevailed. But save in drink old Ben had a very direct adherence to Gandy, having sailed with him upon the *Tortoise*, and though I heard him muttering that times were not the old times, and that the *Sea Hawk* should have had its holds weighted by now with plundered freight, and that the captain was not the man who had played slaver, gentleman of fortune, pirate 'twixt the Gold Coast and the Main—put all with many foul oaths in which the fellow had a proficiency—for the most he went about his duties steadily,

and with a skill that marked him a seaman of no common parts. And from his talk overheard by chance, or from Mat's yarns in the foc'sle head, I gained a pretty picture of Simon Gandy, thirty and odd years back, when he sailed the *Tortoise*, and the flag he flew was not the flag of England. Once old Mat in confidential mood inspired by grog had me down to see his chest, and what it held. And out of its sandalwood scented depths he drew a tattered flag—black it was, and sea-stained, and it had on it the semblance of a skull and cross-bones worked in tarnished silver thread.

'A wench in Limehouse stitched it,' he told me. 'She was my fancy. She'd a skin white as this bit of skull, and eyes as blue as the Main. Dead she is. And wrecked is the old *Tortoise*—thirty and odd years. And I has the blue *Tortoise* on my arm same as the Captain and Ben as was bo'sun in 'er. And this 'ere's the flag she flew! And this 'ere's the flag the *Sea Hawk* would be flying if the Captain was 'alf the man he was. Young Jim, old age is the worst sickness as ever a man can 'ave. Yellow Jack and the scurvy don't rot a man as old age rots! And the fear of wot the parson says—lake of fire, an' worms as eats into yer 'art!'

Once only all this while did Gandy have occasion to discipline severely a fellow of his crew, who cursed in answer to Oakes' cursing, and when the mate struck him to the deck, drew a knife, and swore to cut his life out. Mr. Gandy's blow stretched him senseless; he lay in irons

that night ; and on the following morn all hands were piped on deck for his flogging. I mark the horror of it now—the reddening cat, the fellow's bloody back, and old Ben muttering to Mat, ' The Captin's still the Captin ! Like old times it is.'

Quartered still in the little cabin, Rob and I of a night would plan escape at the next port we put into, but all the while we lay at St. Jago, or at Rio de Janeiro or at the Cape, the vigilance of Gandy over us was constant.

For the most we were locked in our cabin, or if we came on deck, were watched by Mat and the seamen, and, though Gandy and Corbe might go ashore, we were not allowed to leave the ship. So, too, Erskine, who had been our friend, and now seemed wholly Gandy's, through the lure of the treasure, was held aboard. But from the first days out, when we had got our sea legs, and staggered feebly up to the deck, we had no speech with Erskine alone. It seemed that he had thrown in his lot with Gandy and John Corbe—from that night in the cabin. He would pass long hours with the pair poring over charts by which Gandy shaped his course, or pacing the deck in converse with him.

So overseas sailed we on a fair voyage broken only by brief storm and brief calm. Storm with the heavens and the seas commingling in horrible, darkness, rent by the white bolts of lightning. Calm with the waters like the surface of a vast refining vat, copper-green and copper-blue smeared with gold, the sun as a furnace fire, the sails of the *Sea Hawk* with-

out life or movement, the pitch bubbling from the planks of the deck, the seamen lounging stark in the shade, the sea and the sky blood-red at eve, and purple till, when the night fell as a pall, the moon floated on the waters, like a dead man's face—floated from sea to sky; and the stars were the same deathly hue as the moon. So with the sweet breeze coming singing over the waters the *Sea Hawk* took wing.

Rob and I grew bronzed with sun and wind and spray, lithe and active of body, confident enough to take our turn aloft, liking the life at sea, and at last ceasing utterly to dread the end of this voyage to the isle north of New Holland marooning murder, whatsoever should be Mr. Gandy's fulfilment of his promise to the three rogues, with whom he had bargained for his ship. Now from his navigation of the *Sea Hawk* Mr. Gandy found yet the leisure in fine weather to school us for an hour each morning—to his cabin he had brought with him from the Black House a little library of books, old poets, old romances, and old writers of stage plays. So, while my body grew, my mind was schooled by his teaching, and all these books, read and re-read—from splendid Shakespeare to stout old Tobias Smollett. For Mr. Gandy's tolerant kindness to us, for the care he spent in our tuition, as if we had been, indeed, his scholars at the Black House, and all the evil he had wrought us since had gone for nothing, I did believe that he had never purposed fulfilment of his pledge

to the three rogues. But I believed, too, that feeling his age upon him, and recalling his seizure in the cave, he hoped to strike a bargain with Heaven, having to his final account his care of us against the black record of his sinning. All the while throughout the voyage he made no hypocritical pretence of religious practice; though once on coming suddenly into his cabin I found him reading closely the Gospels of Christ from an old Bible, black-covered and clasped with tarnished silver. And in his eyes was a look of terror, and on his brow sweat, as if the voice of God thundered in his ears. The man grew old; and the man understood that his days drew to an end. The man bargained us for the salvation of his soul. Aye, he grew very old, for though sun and sea spray bronzed his skin, his face was deeply lined with age; his lips twitched curiously; his beard, if the storm prevented his shaving his chin, was snow-white. He was becoming bent, his great body was shrinking away. He feared the Hand of God, and the punishment that death meant for him.

Overseas, month on month! Overseas, racing before the wind, on leaving the Cape of Good Hope borne many leagues before the storm. And nigh ten months had passed ere to the south we made out faint in sea haze the rocky outlines of a distant shore. It was at evening, and the night dropping black from the heaven shut the sight from our curious gaze. And a great wind getting up in the night blew us from shore—the coast of New Holland, Mr.

Gandy declared it, though he was sailing his ship in waters strange to him—and on the morrow there was naught about us only save the great waves rolling mountainous, grey-green for the dullness of the overcast heaven, that presently burst in fire and teeming rain. And the racing storm bore us many leagues out of our course.

Now, it was the night of 6th October, when, being ten months out from the English coast, the *Sea Hawk* came to her end. A wild night—in the cabin I heard the wind scream and menace over the brig like a fiend about to destroy her, and fling us all to drown, and I had seen the weird blue lights play like corpse candles round about the masts and spars, and had listened to old Ben muttering fearfully to Mat, that there'd be wild work at sea that night, and that the lights foretold the death of every man of us.

The hours through, Gandy never left the deck ; the hours through, Mat and Bill held the wheel. And in the cabin, as if to keep his courage up, John Corbe sat at his drink, and with him Erskine. Once when clinging to rope and rail I forced my way thither, I found the pair of them at cards. John Corbe was riotous, Erskine pale and composed, and dealing the cards with a firm hand, seeming absorbed in the game for all the roar of wind and sea without, and in a chance lull Gandy's voice sounding trumpet-like. I had brought them a fresh bottle of Madeira, and set it in John Corbe's hand, lest with the rolling of the ship it smash on the floor. Wildly he stared at me, and

recognizing me, muttered an oath, and cracked the neck from the bottle and filled his glass. I went out then, and drenched with the sea, and once nigh washed from the deck by a great wave, forced my way unheeded down into the cabin. Rob was there in the dark clinging to his bunk, and shivering and chill the pair of us sat there with the blankets about us, hearken- ing to the wild turmoil of the storm—the thun- derous fall of waters on the deck, sick for the dread of drowning, sick for the rolling of the brig. And though we sought to speak of what was passing and to tell our terrors, the great sound drowned our voices, and presently we lay back in the bunk.

I slept for weariness of the long night and the darkness. I slept to wake at a terrific crash and a rending of timbers. The shock flung the pair of us on to the cabin floor, and our cries of terror mingled with the wail that went to heaven. But the *Sea Hawk* ceased to roll, and she was held firm and fast, only the waves broke over her as with the beating of a mighty drum.

‘She’s struck,’ yelled I, clinging to Rob. ‘On deck!’

The cabin door was shut fast for the shock, and the crushing of the timbers of the brig, groaning now as with a mortal hurt, at every wave that leaped upon her to beat the life from out her. Aye, and though we tugged at the door, though we sought to smash it in with our puny fists, it held—it held. We were caught to drown as rats,—we were caught to

drown—and we screamed out wildly to Mat, to Gandy, to Erskine—no reply! No answer save the thundering of the waters tumbling upon the *Sea Hawk*—no answer save the groaning of the timbers, as if they parted. We made our way then to the port-hole—it was shattered and the glass had fallen in. Against it without was piled a stack of fallen timber, as if the masts had gone down against it, and lay in an impenetrable tangle of wreckage to shut us in to drown. But though the seas broke without cease upon the wreck no water leaked yet into the cabin, and by the slant of its decking it seemed that the brig, like the galleon of the isle we had sought, had broken against a reef, and was held in its jaws till the great waves should smash it to matchwood. Pounding again upon the door, and crying out till we tired, and bringing no one, it seemed to us that between one roller and the next Gandy's voice sounded above us like a trumpet from afar.

IN black darkness—death without—we passed, it must have been five hours, though they dragged to an interminable length. All the while no one came nigh us. All the while the waves thundered upon the wreck, and the timbers groaned in anguish. And shouting to be heard by one another for the turmoil, we were conjecturing hour on hour what had chanced to Gandy and his crew when the brig struck—whether the waves had washed them from the decks and the wild cry that had gone up from the sea told of their passing. Only the recollection of the sound of Gandy's voice after that cry gave us to believe that he and others of the ship's company had outlived the brig's destruction, that they had either put off in the boats, or been washed away later by the waves.

Now, shut up in this death-trap we did believe at last that the waves were abating in force, for though the shock of their falling reached us, still it seemed to us that the weight was less, and that the quivering and groaning of the wreckage lessened. At intervals still we beat upon the door ; at intervals tried our whole strength upon it, but yet it held securely.

Until our vigil ended. Until from without a hoarse voice growled at us. 'Are ye alive?' Ben's voice, whereat for his hate of me, I felt a chill go down my back.

'Aye, we're shut here. The door's caught fast. Will you break it down?'

'Ye're there, are ye? I've half a mind——' and the voice broke off.

But he had gone away, it seemed, to fetch an axe, for presently a crash of splintering wood told us that he was hewing down the door, And in a few minutes he had it smashed asunder and we were struggling through in the darkness.

'Ben, what's happened?' gasped Rob. 'Are all the rest drowned?'

'Aye, drowned! Captin and all the rest drowned, every man jack of 'em! Him, as a rope wouldn't hang, or Davy Jones drown. Come out o' this!'

Through the darkness then we struggled into the light of the companion-way. The gleam of light blinded our eyes. Spume of the sea blew down upon us. But presently we were out into the light of day and gazing aghast at the wreck of the *Sea Hawk*. She had been borne forward in a tremendous wave, and flung down upon a reef. She had been broken amidships, and the masts had crashed down. And the great waves, leaving but the stern held fast between two lines of reef, had swept the remainder of the broken hull into the deep water beyond the reef, where it had shot down instantly. So much old Ben told us, while we clung by the

remnant of the rail at the companion-way. The sun was aflame about us in a heaven of dazzling blue ; blue and white-capped was the ocean—save only about a quarter-mile to the north-east a yellow rock went high above the waters. The wreckage of masts and spars lay piled against the side of the brig to windward. Wreckage of spars and broken boats, and shattered planks and barrels floated upon the waters. No sign of any survivor from the wreck saw we on the long yellow reefs ; no sign of boat upon the sea, though old Ben shouting to be heard above the tumbling breakers gave us to understand that Gandy and Corbe and the American and several of his shipmates had put off in a boat—not hearing him when he yelled to them from the broken stern of the ship, such was the sounding of the waves that his voice was lost. And roundly old Ben cursed them, clinging with us to the rail with the spume flung upon us from the sea.

‘ What now, Ben ? ’ roared Rob in his ear. ‘ We’ll drown if we stay here.’

‘ Aye, aye,’ he growled back. ‘ What now ? And ye’re like to drown. An’ what’s it to old Ben, anyway ? Born with a caul, ’e was, an’ can’t drown.’ And drew a bottle of grog from his pocket and took a swig. ‘ What’s it to Ben ? Didn’t drown on the *Tortoise*, ’e didn’t. Aye, an’ what matters ? ’ and pulled again at the bottle.

Now, clinging still to the rail, I saw that Ben had stuck in the leather belt about his middle a long knife in a sheath. And all the while he

drank his evil eye watched me. And for the recollection of his threats of vengeance on me for burning his cheek with the iron, and for his hate of me, I found a new terror beyond the rollers thundering upon the reef and wreck.

Roller on roller—in the wild race to the reef sometimes a great wave would commingle with a breaking wave, and gaining volume plunge with terrific force upon the deck, and the wash nigh sweep us from our hold. Drenched now to the skin we clung there desperately for the while, scanning the reefs and sea for any hope of escape or sign of survivors. And, indeed, it seemed that the rollers were gaining in force, as if strengthened by the brief respite of the dawn ; the shred of the *Sea Hawk* caught in two reefs seemed breaking up fast. Between that yellow fang to the north-east lines of reef appeared, some low, some high and dry and glistening with salt and piled with litter of the wreck, on one I did believe I made out the body of a drowned man left stark in the sun. But on the yellow fangs our hopes were centred ; that maybe the boat might have found there a landing-place, or that by a rough raft of broken planks, we might make our way thither to safety for the time. All the while Ben was swallowing down his grog—muttering now drunkenly to himself, at times scowling at me—once fingering the haft of the knife stuck in his belt, thinking better of it, it seemed, and dragging out a fresh bottle from his pocket. All the while the rollers were gaining in force.

Then I saw that Ben had plucked out the knife, and was sliding down towards me.

And suddenly thunderous the waters plunged upon the remnant of the brig. The shock flung me nigh stunned from my hold ; swept me forward—out. Under I went into the cauldron of waters, was carried on drowning, was dropped momentarily on a projecting rock, sought to cling to it, but was again swept forward. I could not swim. In Mr. Pounds' household I had learnt no manly sport or accomplishment. Over me drummed the waters ; the salt was in my mouth—my lungs ; I was choking, drowning ! Again I struck a rock, and was left there breathless. I sought to dig my hands into its cracks to hold there against the next wave—mercifully the next wave was lighter ; and the horror of drowning possessed me with a wild strength ; though the waves nigh beat the life out of my body lying supine, I was not swept forward. And as the waters receded and the rock emerged momentarily, I heard Rob's scream in my ear : ' Jim, Jim—up for your life ! ' And his hand had caught mine and I was on my feet, and we were racing blindly forward. At our backs the roller came with an angered roar ; ere it reached us we were down again and clinging to the corrugated surface of the rock. It broke upon us, passed, left us still clinging, and again we were on our feet and splashing to the higher reef that showed before us. And climbing up—though the ensuing roller nigh tore us back—up to a terrace clear for the time from

the sea and glistening with salt and littered with driftwood. It was the rock whereon I had seen the body lie stark in the sun.

Exhausted now we fell, and lay breathless and gasping. And the sound of the waters drummed in my ears still; and my heart pounded in my breast for breathlessness and terror; and the salt water in my throat was choking me, till I was deathly sick. Scarce conscious, there I lay till the burning sun gave warmth to my body, and lent new life to me. I found then that I was lying with Rob's arm about me, and that he sought with the sleeve of his sodden jacket to wipe the salt from my lips.

'Safe!' I gasped. 'Yet safe!'

'Aye, safe,' he muttered, 'till the tide rises and the sharks get us.'

'Where's Ben?'

'Look!' He drew me up. And with smarting, salt-bleared eyes I made out dimly in the deep pool between the reef whereon the *Sea Hawk* had come to her death and the reefs whereon we had first been flung by the great wave, a swirl in the waters—black fins, white bellies—about some shape—some body! And ere the roller swept over the last shred of the wreck and plunged into the pool, I saw that the waters were red—as with blood. Sick for the horror of it, I slid from Rob's arm upon the rock. And oddly in my brain sounded Ben's words, while he fingered his knife and glared at me, 'What's it to old Ben? Born with a caul, 'e was, an' can't drown.'

FOR the terror of Ben's death, for our exhaustion from our battering by the waves, and from our long vigil, we lay sick and weak upon the rock without count of time. Sense of the burning sun and consuming thirst aroused me at last, and feebly I got to my feet and roused Rob, who was lying so still that at first I thought him dead.

'Rob,' muttered I, 'we can't lie here. The tide'll rise, and the sea will wash us off. To die as Ben died! And I parch with thirst.'

'I'm on fire,' he answered. 'Let's seek among the stuff that's flung up here; there may be a barrel of water, else we die.'

Now the rock was littered about with a medley of broken driftwood and torn weed. No other body than that I had seen from the wreck lying on the rock—one of the Corbe folk, lying stiff with the salt glistening on the grey face and lather at the parted lips, smiling up to the dazzling sky in ghastly mockery. Shuddering, we drew a shred of sacking over the face, and made our way along the reef in search of a chance barrel of water. And mercifully we found a little keg—it had been half-empty and

had floated in with the seas—and we stove in the head with a broken oar, and cupping our hands and finding the water yet sweet we drank deeply. I tell you the draught lent new life to me—hope, courage, Aye, and recollection that I was very hungry, for morn was well advanced, and I had tasted nothing since the previous day. Among the litter on the rock was much biscuit, broken and brine-sodden, and gathering this in handfuls we swallowed it down, and from the salt in it must needs drink deeply again from the beaker.

‘We must save the rest, Rob,’ said I, ‘for we’ll be dying of thirst ere the day’s out.’

‘When the tide rises,’ he answered gloomily, regarding the pool between us and the ruin of the *Sea Hawk*. ‘It won’t matter. We won’t die of thirst, Jim.’

‘By then,’ said I, ‘we’ll have a raft that may carry us to that rock over there. There are spars and rope enough and to spare, Rob. We’ll get to work now. And maybe Gandy and Erskine are safe on the rock. It seems of some size.’

The great rock went up clear now in the sunlight—a yellow rock with the seas breaking at its base and rolling up against it in showers of spray. But I believed that at the summit I could make out a line of dull green as if of brushwood or grass. Aye, and I believed that I saw moving there the figure of a man.

‘Rob,’ cried I, ‘there’s some one on the rock. Look! Can you make out? Wave!’

We sent our cry echoing over the waters. I

looked about for a garment or a sip of sail to wave to the figure; finding none save the shred of canvas on the dead man's face, I whipped off my shirt, drying upon my body, and while we both shouted our loudest I waved the garment wildly, and saw the figure suddenly lean forward and signal with his hand to us. But if he shouted to us from the cliff the distance and the thunder of the seas held the sound from us.

'Who is it, Rob, d'ye think?' asked I. 'Can you make out?'

'Erskine—it looks like Erskine. Erskine, who's Gandy's friend, not ours, and cared not a jot for us last night—whether we died like rats in a trap.'

'Aye,' I muttered savagely. 'He thought only to save himself—unless Ben lied. But will they come to us, d'ye think?'

'Unless their boat were piled up on the rock last night. Or unless Gandy forbids. There are others, see!'

Several figures now shaped on the brow of the distant cliff. Straining my eyes I could make out colours and the glint of the sun on buttons or gold braid. Gandy, by the figure's height, and by the blue and gold 'twas Gandy, and with him one who seemed to be John Corbe; another who might be Mat; yet another big and bearded as the landlord of *The Gold Scales*, and one whom in the distance I could not make out, but took to be one of the young fishermen of Corbe. I waved my shirt; they waved back, and presently they kindled a fire among the brush on

the brow of the cliff, for a curl of smoke went up into the air. And slipping off our drenched garments then and spreading them out to dry, we sat naked awaiting their coming, at times splashing on our bodies the water from the pools left by the sea, for the blazing sun burnt our flesh. But though we waited an hour or more, hoping that they would put off in their boat and come to us, they did not appear; only one man held to the brow of the cliff and signalled to us at times, all the while keeping up the fire. So till the sun stood at its height; so till it commenced to descend the western heaven, the rollers broke upon the reefs in white foam, slowly smashing away the last of the *Sea Hawk's* hull, and plunging into the deep blue pool between us and the wreck. Aye, and the sharks fought at a horrible banquet in the waters about us.

'If we stay here, Rob,' cried I at last, leaping to my feet, 'we'll be washed off the rock. Into your duds, man, and help me build a raft. It may float us to the island.'

Struggling then into our garments, dry, but hard with salt and chafing our sunburnt flesh, we set ourselves to shaping the sorriest craft that ever floated on the seas. We lashed four big spars into a-square, finding a sufficiency of rope washed up with the driftwood; to this we bound lighter spars; so formed at last a lumbbersome lattice which it seemed might bear us from the rock. But it was at best only a ramshackle affair, and I did believe, though it might hold us from the sharks for

the while, it would inevitably founder in deeper water. To it we lashed our keg with the last of the fresh water, and finding a pair of sound oars by which we might guide its course, our task completed, we ate a little of the salted biscuit, and lay down on the raft to wait the rising of the tide. For the heat of the sun, fiery brass in a cobalt sky, and for our weariness, we slept, the pair of us, the afternoon through.

I was awakened suddenly by the splash of water in my face. I woke to find the sea blood-red and the sun as an immense blood-red balloon falling in the west. And the tide was running high, the reefs were vanishing under the flood, save only the highest rock whereon our raft yet rested. In long low surge the rollers came, the roaring of the seas upon the reefs was endless—menacing—the thought of Ben's grim passing in the pool possessed me with a deathly sickness. I started up and gripped my oar, and screamed to Rob, 'Up, —for your life. We'll be washed off!'

He was upon his feet on the instant, seizing his oar blindly; crouching low then, the pair of us to await the coming of the wave that should bear us out to sea. I cried to Heaven then to help us—and the breakers roared in answer.

It came! Came with a sudden roll of sea and beat of sound. In the sun's last light I saw the great green curve of water plunging down upon us. And we were flung forward, losing our grip of the oars and clinging to the spars lashed to our raft. So with the water breaking over us we floated out from the reef.

MY prayer to Heaven was assuredly answered. Else had the lumbering raft whereon we floated through the darkness foundered under us, and we been drowned in the seas or torn by the sharks. But, clinging to it, we were borne on by the great wave, and though the seas broke over us still—though once we struck against a reef with a great crash and grinding of timbers, the stout ropes held and on we swept—not daring, either of us, to shift from our frantic grip upon the planks.

Aye, on we swept—not now in the wash of the wave, but caught in a current, as it seemed, and all the while gathering speed and force, as if we were being sucked into a mill-race. Over us broke the waters, drenching us; such was the sound, like the constant beat of great drums, or distant thunder, or the roll of cannon fire afar, that, though my head was close to Rob's, and though from time to time he shouted in my ear, I could make out no word of his or understand. Maybe my senses were dull with terror—indeed, I recollect only at this

hour a horror of great darkness and a horror of sound.

On, sweeping forward with the rush of water. On, clinging to the planking, nigh drowned ; the salt in my mouth, my nostrils—drenched, chilled, stiff with cold. On, for an eternity. Time only seeming to stand still—all else a rush of waters and a sense of great speed. On—into nothing !

I think I lost consciousness then from terror and exposure. I can recall nothing—till came the end. I had a sudden sense of a great crash, as the crack of doom. I had a sense that some mystic force snatched the planks from my frozen grip ; that I was swept forward with the seas. Then nothing. . . .

I woke gasping, deathly sick, nigh blind with salt. I had a sense that some one rubbed my limbs and body—that Erskine's voice was in my ears. Ay, 'twas Erskine, whose face I looked upon, when my eyes cleared—Erskine in the red light of a fire built high. I lay stark before the fire—they had stripped my drenched rags from my body ; and laid me out on a blanket and a bed of brush. Erskine was holding brandy in a cup to my lips, bidding me drink it. And there was in my brain the roaring of great waters. I gulped a little of the spirit down and felt it run through my veins like fire. And the draught lending me strength, I sat up stiffly, feeling sharp pains dart through my battered body ; and I muttered, ' Rob—what of him ? '

' He's safe, lad,' Erskine answered. ' Rest

awhile.' And held the cup again to my mouth. Again I drank, and instantly, for the strength of the brandy and for my weakness, I fell back to sleep.

I did not wake till the sun was high—burning my face. I was wrapped still in the blanket on the couch of brush. Weak and worn yet, I lay there awhile, scarcely realizing what had passed—dully regarding the curl of smoke from the fire and the figures grouped about it. Erskine, with his back towards me; John Corbe, black-chinned and sun-burnt, folded in a boat cloak; Jonas Wall, big and bearded; Mat; and a swart, thick-set young fellow of the Corbe folk, named Treloar. And by my side, wrapped in his blanket, lay Rob Orme, snoring still, though the sun told that morn was well advanced. But of Mr. Gandy I saw nothing for the time.

Now the group lounging about the fire were breakfasting, for a most savoury smell of frying salt pork was wafted to me by the sea wind, and recalled to me that I had eaten nothing save sodden biscuit for two days thence. So I wrapped my blanket about me and staggered over to the fire.

'Aha, Jim!' Erskine greeted me cheerily, starting up. 'So you're alive after all. And I take it most infernally hungry.'

'Nigh starving,' I told him. 'But I'm seeking my clothes first.'

Save Erskine, no man gave me word, but all glowered blackly at me. Erskine pointed to my rags drying in the sun. 'I thought

when we pulled you out of the sea last night they'd be your grave clothes,' he said. 'But for the full moon, and Mat here seeing your raft washing in, you'd have drowned. You struck on the reef out there,' pointing down to a yellow line of rock washed by the sea below us.

Now the camp was pitched on a broad terrace of rock, descending like a flight of steps into the water. The storm had passed utterly—only the rollers swept from the sapphire sea over the reefs, going out, reef beyond reef, to the yellow rock where we had passed the previous day, a quarter of a mile out. But the wreck had broken utterly, only on the lowest terrace was piled a great litter of drift-wood and broken barrels, and, drawn up well beyond reach of the waves, the boat wherein they had put off from the *Sea Hawk*. And at the sight of it a wave of savage anger surged through me against Erskine, who would have left us on the wreck to drown; and even when they had espied us on the rock had made no effort to rescue us. Blackly I scowled at him, and, instantly reading my thought, he motioned me apart from the rest and muttered, 'Don't blame me unjustly, Jim! I was washed away when the ship struck—flung up on this place.'

'Ben, whom the sharks tore yesterday,' I answered, 'told us that you put off in the boat with Gandy, not caring whether we drowned, so long as you lived.'

He answered angrily, with the blood mounting

to his face. 'The fellow lied! I ask you to believe me, Jim.'

'If I believed that,' said I, 'you did not try to help us yesterday, though you had the boat there.'

'Stove in, and leaking like a sieve.'

'Yet you could have tried,' I faltered.

'Yet I could have tried. I tell you, Jim, I sought to swim out to you when we could not launch the boat—or when'—dropping his voice—'Corbe and that fellow would not. And I could not for the sharks. Look for yourself,' with a sweep of his hand towards the waters where yet the black fins showed. 'All day I toiled at repairing the boat—all day—when not one of these fellows would move a hand, bidding me let you drown. I would have put off alone, Jim, with the night, when the boat was seaworthy again, save that the fellow Mat marked your raft caught by the current and driving in. 'Twas I, at least, who snatched you from drowning.'

I said no more, but nodding dully took up my garments and turned back to Rob, now sitting up blinking in the sunlight.

Old Mat, filling his pipe, was glowering at us. A most evil portrait he presented, his head swathed in a bandana handkerchief, his brown face mottled with purple bruises, a scrub of black and grey beard upon his chin, his garments stained with salt and seaweed. And says Mat, 'D'ye plan mutiny on the high seas? What's your palaver? What I says is, if it's for us to hear, let's hear it.'

Erskine, laughing carelessly, though his eyes showed an angry light, answered back, 'It's not mutiny, Mat. It's why these lads were left aboard and not brought off when the boat got away.'

'There's better shipmates than them,' growled Mat, 'down in Davy Jones's locker, or in the sharks' guts. There's Ben—he was a proper man, he was. Him as come off with me from the old *Tortoise*, and him to feed the sharks. And these young swabs as be ashore, as bold as you please'—Mat spat disgustedly into the fire.

'Get into your breeches, Jim,' says Erskine, and come and get some food. 'Mr. Corbe, a word with you.'

John Corbe, who had been sitting silent and dejected, rose without a glance at me, and drew apart with Erskine, while the seamen remained smoking by the fire, muttering among themselves. I grabbed our duds from the rock and made over to Rob, and, dropping the garments, gripped his hand.

'Rob,' cried I, 'it's brave to see you safe. It's brave!'

'We're surely born to be hanged, as Gandy used to say at the Black House,' he answered, grinning at me. 'The seas can't drown us. Where is Gandy?'

'I haven't seen him,' I answered, drawing my shirt over my head. 'I haven't asked Erskine. Up on the cliff, I take it.'

'It was he we saw. He's not drowned.'

'Ay, it was he we saw. What's to pass now,

Rob? I think but for Erskine we'd not be living now, if John Corbe and old Mat had had their will. Mat's grumbling that we should be alive, and his shipmate Ben—dead! And Wall and Treloar are of a like mind.' So I rapidly recounted Erskine's story as we got into our clothes—all the while Erskine and Corbe conversed apart, and the group muttered about the fire, and at times glanced furtively at us.

'What are they plotting, Jim?' Rob whispered.

'Maybe that the boat won't hold us, or that there won't be enough food and water, if they seek to get away from the island. Come on, Rob!' And the pair of us walked over to the fire.

Mat drew his pipe from his mouth and glared at us. 'And what may you be wanting?' demanded he sourly.

'Food,' I told him.

'See here,' he growled. 'There's little enough grub come ashore. And there's less water. And not enough grog. So you can go and shift around for yourselves. That's what we've talked out, my mates and me—ain't it?'

'That's so,' barked Treloar. And 'Ay, ay,' Wall grunted, nodding his head.

Erskine, with John Corbe, came striding over to the fire. 'Now, you men,' said he easily, 'what's amiss here?'

'These young swabs,' Mat told him, 'is wantin' grub. And they gets no grub. There's not enough to keep life in us, and there's not enough water. So they gets none.'

Erskine, with John Corbe beside him, said coolly, 'Whatever there is of food and drink, you men, is to be shared and shared alike by every one who's come ashore. There's little enough, say you? There is! And because of that Mr. Corbe here and I propose to take command, and put every man on rations—so much water, so much food and so much grog.'

'You're proposing,' roared Mat, lurching to his feet.

'We have so decided, Mr. Corbe and I. If we remain in this place we'll starve or die of thirst, every man of us. If we provision the boat, we may reach the shore of New Holland, or work down the eastern coast to Botany Bay. That's our one chance. We ask you to agree to this?'

'There's not enough for six,' vowed Mat, with a savage oath, 'and there be less for eight. And who put you in command? I'd a fancy you came aboard the *Sea Hawk* trussed up like a hen. I'd a fancy you was in irons till we sailed. And you're to take command, are ye? I ses—an' so ses we all—we takes our orders from the Captain, an' when we don't we takes our orders from me.'

'You're an insolent dog,' snarled Corbe, breaking his silence. 'I warn you that Mr. Erskine and I are armed—we've pistols and powder. And I'll put a ball through that ugly figure-head of yours without the least regret. You should have hanged long since.'

Mat, black with rage, snatched from his belt a long sheath knife and lurched forward. But

instantly Erskine and Corbe had each a pistol out levelled at him; so, blasphemous and black, he drew back from the fire—Treloar and Wall with him—and stood there shaking his fist and uttering a string of horrid oaths and threats of vengeance on us.

‘Enough of this,’ cried Erskine. ‘If you’re not wiser, fellow, we’ll take the boat and leave you here. That’s your choice—to take your orders from us or be left here to die.’

‘I takes my orders from the Captain only,’ roared Mat.

‘So—take your orders,’ Erskine retorted, and pointed to the figure of Mr. Gandy coming down the rock.

For the instant, Mr. Gandy so lurched in his gait, I did believe that he was drunk. As he came forward I saw that he was broken, that his face was as the face of a man nigh to death. His head was bare, and his silver locks blew out dishevelled in the breeze. His features, once handsome and imperious, were ivory white, his cheeks sunken, his great eyes burning with fever. And his hands shook as with palsy, at times groped in the air, as if he came on blindly. His blue coat, which had been so fine in its dye and its splendour of gold lace, was shrunken on him, though his body was shrunken; his white breeches stained with green seaweed; his silken stockings, ungartered, slipping down; the silver buckles of his shoes tarnished on the shrivelling leather.

‘So, take your orders,’ Erskine said again.

‘Captain, what’s amiss?’ gasped Mat, lurch-

ing to Gandy's side, and aiding him forward.

Mr. Gandy's voice came croaking. 'The Hand of God!' he said; 'the Hand of God!'

And so supported by the seaman's arm, slid down upon a rock, and sat there shaking, palsied, as the figure of death, all the while muttering to himself, 'The Hand of God!'

WE planned to put out to sea that night. All day we laboured—Erskine and Corbe and Rob and I—in repairing the boat and in collecting provisions, for never a hand's turn offered Mat and his shipmates. They had found a little keg of rum washed up on the beach, and, broaching this, the three seamen remained about it during the day, growing uproarious, lethargic then with the heat of the sun, and finally lying stretched out in drunken stupor by the empty keg. Gandy, too, had fallen asleep by the fire—he had not slept for the two nights ashore, Erskine told us, but had gone pacing up and down the grassy summit of the cliff as a madman, muttering wildly to himself, his face as the face of the damned, and his eyes haunted ; he had not been sane since first he came ashore. All the previous night he had kept his vigil on the cliff, stalking up and down, with the big moon looking down upon him as a bleached, grinning skull, and the winds from the sea shrieking about the rock as souls in torment. The Hand of God—'twas but the decay of age upon him ; three score and ten,—and he had passed the

allotted span. He slept now by the fire as quietly as a child, but his face was as a death mask fashioned in white plaster.

The planks of the boat were broken in by the force with which it had been flung by the sea upon the rocks when Gandy and his fellows came ashore. We had but an axe, a hammer and a few nails from the little locker, and a clasp knife for repairing the damage, so that we made sorry and slow shift at rendering the craft seaworthy. We had but one barrel of water washed ashore; this we lashed securely at the stern. Our provisions for the desperate endeavour to reach the coast of New Holland consisted of a barrel of salt pork, four sacks of biscuit soaked with brine, and enough oysters and mussels from the rocks to feed us for a day or two. And we collected further much broken biscuit, a few potatoes washed in from the wreck; all this we stowed away and lashed down, lest the seas wash it from the boat. From a roll of canvas and a coil of Manila rope we rigged up a sail and set up a spar for the mast; we had oars and to spare, but of space, when all was in and the boat ready for launching, we had not more than enough in comfort for six men. And there were on the rock eight of us from the wrecked *Sea Hawk*.

'The boat will never float, Erskine,' says John Corbe, as we paused at last to regard our preparations for the voyage. Since I had come to the isle he had said no word to me. 'If you're wise we'll leave those drunken dogs

and Gandy here and put off now. It's our one hope of safety.'

'If they stay here,' said Erskine, 'they die, and speedily.'

'Better that they should die than we,' cried Corbe. 'We take them aboard, and the boat sinks. Or else they slit our throats or cast us overboard.'

'Yet I'll not leave them here. Out of the track of ships—no water. Corbe, if you will have it so, we shall draw lots with them, whether they take the boat, or we.'

'I'm in no mind for jesting, Erskine!'

'I'm not jesting, Corbe. The notion is a wise one. We'll draw lots.'

'Erskine,' cried Corbe impatiently, 'I tell you, though you stay—you and the boys there—though it means putting off with those three scoundrels and Gandy who's nigh to death, I go! Draw lots with them, if you will. I go!'

He turned upon his heel, and left us, striding down the terrace then as if dreading lest we put off without him. And never all that day did John Corbe leave the boat, not chancing our sailing and his marooning on the yellow rock.

The yellow rock was shaped like the crater of a burning mountain, going high above the sea. Climbing up in the evening Rob and I found ourselves within a cup of rock—a wall of rock about a circle of grass and scrub. And from the wall we saw the crimson sun sink into a crimson sea; the glow burn out, the illimitable waters dyed purple, blacken for the fall-

ing night, whiten with the great gold moon. Calm was upon the waters ; in the tropic night the sea crooned on the reefs—the wind was dead. A sea of silver blue, a heaven of silver blue, star-studded ; the moon a globe of pale gold. Suddenly from below us came the sound of a pistol shot, a bitter cry, a stream of horrid oaths.

In terror then we raced across the cup, scrambled down the steep ascent, were out upon the terraces, and running for the boat. In the full light of the moon I saw upon the terrace thirty feet above the boat the four men in death grips—a fifth, Mat, lay tumbled at their feet ; four men, Erskine matched against the great Wall, Corbe against young Treloar. I saw the gleam of steel in Treloar's hand—saw him break loose and strike—saw Corbe beat thrice his pistol butt upon the fellow's skull. And as Treloar reeled and the knife clanged on the stone, I saw Corbe grip at his throat and shower blows on his head, and suddenly fling him crashing down upon the rocks. Corbe swung about to look upon the contest between the American and Wall. Erskine's shirt had been torn from his back—nude to the waist he fought with Wall—apart now, the huge fellow crouching low, knife in hand. I saw Wall's face, bestial with drink, eyes flaming in the clear light of the moon, mouth slavering. I saw him rush in ; heard Erskine's fist crack on his jaw like a pistol shot ; saw Wall go down. Again he was on his feet, but reeling now—Erskine was on him.

They were locked then in a death grip ; thrice the giant swung the American from his feet ; thrice he eluded him. But now they were struggling nearer—nearer to the edge of the terrace ; it seemed that together they must go down into the sea. Erskine's right hand was clear ; it swung up into the air ; smashed down upon Wall's face ; stunned him, it seemed, for his arm swung wide. Erskine had leaped back ; Wall was staggering on the very edge of the rock. Suddenly he missed his footing, and fell backwards, crashing down upon the rocks below.

And Erskine, blood streaming from a gash across his brows, was coming back along the terrace towards us, and laughing lightly as we clasped his hands. And John Corbe was muttering, 'A precious business, Erskine ! The rogues nigh had us. At least we'll not burden the boat with this carrion,' kicking contemptuously the body of the man who had sought to murder him and whom he had slain.

AN hour thence we sailed. Mr. Gandy, though ghastly pale and shaken still, had awakened strengthened from his slumber—he had slept through all the fight upon the rocks—and having drunk a dram of rum, and eaten, had gone down with us unsupported to the boat. The bodies of the dead men on the rocks we lifted between us and laid out together on the brush, and we piled upon them rocks and broken timber for their burial. Sick with the horror of the task, I rejoiced indeed that we were to put off instantly—Erskine and Corbe and Rob, I believed, were as glad as I. But Mr. Gandy, sitting watching us, made no sign—though his mind was clear he uttered no word of anger or regret—only when Erskine offered his arm to aid him down to the boat, he shook his head, and rising unaided walked slowly and stiffly down before us. But seated at the helm I saw that he had spread out upon his knees the little chart that he had drawn from his recollection of the convict's chart of the treasure isle, and that he was peering down upon it, intent.

‘Not ten leagues away,’ he muttered to

Erskine, pointing with shaking finger at the chart, as the American stepped into the boat. 'We founder here, and to-morrow we should have had the treasure under hatches and been sailing home.'

'Should these lads and I have sailed back with you, or been marooned upon the isle?' asked Erskine.

'Ay, ay,' said Gandy with thin laughter. 'I know not. I do believe that I had planned to maroon you. Sorry as is our plight, therefore, you are most fortunate, sir.'

John Corbe stood by the boat, gloomily regarding Gandy and the chart. 'If we land on this isle, Erskine,' he said, 'it cannot be far out of the course we plan. At least we may bear away part of the treasure. If we are to drown or go mad with thirst, or starve, the treasure cannot alter our fate. But if we be picked up by a ship, or if we strike down to Botany Bay, at least we do not land in England penniless. Your ship *The Virginian* is a wreck and the most of your fortune with it. You should be ready as I to make for the island.'

Gandy, with a little compass on the palm of his hand, studied the chart. Not ten leagues south-east, so I take it from my observations ere the storm. We should sail thither well within two days, if the wind be fair.'

'How d'ye say, Erskine?' cried Corbe impatiently.

'We throw away our hopes of living,' Erskine retorted, 'for a wild story of treasure.'

'And yet that very precious rosary of pearls,'

pipéd Gandy. 'And yet the convict's chart.'

'We'll make thither, Erskine,' insisted Corbe. 'I am prepared to risk my life for the venture.'

'Have it so!' Erskine answered shortly. 'And now to launch the boat.'

So we pushed off from the yellow rock where the dead men lay. So we fell to our oars, the four of us, while Gandy sat at the helm. Out from the death trap of the reefs he brought us,—out to the silver sea. An hour we rowed or more, till my hands were blistered—ere a little breeze came singing over the waters; and Erskine and Corbe set the sail. And we were racing soon over the seas—the silver seas—and the foam blew up from the prow, and in our wake gleamed a phosphorescent line of fire. We would take our turn at watching—Erskine directed—he and I, Corbe and Rob—Mr. Gandy sitting at the helm seemed sinking again into the stupor that had come upon him on the isle.

I took the helm and Erskine tended the sail; Mr. Gandy sat beside me, as the very figure of death for his ghastly pallor, his snow-white hair blowing out on the breeze, his eyes burning again with fever as two great jewels.

IT was the morning of the third day ere we landed upon the isle. A green isle girt about with mangroves—going down to the very sea. And as we rowed into a little bay, from deep water into shallow, for the sand shelved gradually, the tide was running out and the stems of the nearest mangroves were hung with weed and crusted with shell fish. And the water below us was clear, and fish of many colours and dead pearl shells shone through the green and gold coloured waters like flowers. Inshore we rowed, till we drew in where the green ring of the mangroves seemed the thinnest, and Erskine, leaping overboard, with the axe hewed a clear space where we might beach the boat. And this isle was no more than a mile or so in circumference, one of many isles going in towards the coast limned in haze afar, and we had not chosen it from many isles save that the convict years since had described it to Gandy as an island topped by a red peak going up above the wreck.

Burnt and blistered from the sun which had glowed from the unflecked heavens through all the previous day and all that morn, we landed on

the isle, a sorry company. Gandy, ghastly and tottering—he had passed the time in the boat with scarce a word to any of us, seeming wrapped in the blackest melancholy; John Corbe, greed in his eyes, greed on his lips, greed in his shaking, clutching hands; Erskine, unshorn as they, black with the sun and sea stained as we. And over us now fell the green shade of the mangroves and the blessed cool; there was no sound of life upon the isle save only the shriek of the sea-fowl, wheeling above us and fishing over the waters. We drank each a cup of water, and ate a shred of biscuit and salt meat, ere we set out upon our quest. For said Erskine—

‘We’ll not tarry here! There’s no water in this place. We must make for the mainland ere the night. An hour, Corbe, and no more!’

So through the mangroves we forced our way, and into the sands. Sands—dune on dune—dazzling as gold in the sunlight, smeared with thin green rushes, withering to yellow for the heat. Sand slipping under our feet, scarce giving us foothold when we sought to scale a dune blown up by the sea winds, so loosely was it piled. And the sun burnt down upon us like fire.

Mr. Gandy, going on ahead as one possessed, set the pace for us. The sweat poured from us. Black flies from the mangrove swamp where the dead fish stank in decay swarmed about us, and were beaten off an instant only. Burning sun, burning yellow sands, and the great figure of Gandy as one possessed stalking ahead.

‘He has gone mad surely,’ gasped Erskine, as we paused below a dune, and Gandy, scaling it, still sped before us.

‘Mad—why, he was ever a mad rogue,’ muttered Corbe, wiping the sweat from his streaming face. ‘Possessed of a devil that would not let him rest. Seventy years and odd, and planning ever to take the seas again, when he might have lived quietly in England. Slaver he’s been, and pirate—madman always.’

‘Fit tutor,’ Erskine sneered, ‘for your kinsman!’

Not a word answered Corbe, but he bent on me a look of bitter hate—all the time of our sailing in the boat he had said no word to me. Turning from us now he scaled the dune and vanished after Gandy. And wearily tramping after through this desert of sand I fell to picturing the refugee from Botany Bay landing on this devilish isle in search of water, as Gandy had told the tale to Corbe—

‘I’d picture to you, Corbe—this argosy, broken upon a reef. And in her holds yet a treasure of gold and jewels, though spices and silks be long since blown to dust—dust with the dust of the dead who trod her decks. . . .

‘I tell you, Corbe, the sand dunes were about him—yellow as glass, smeared with the green of rushes—no trees—no shade. . . .’

Ay, the vision of the fellow shaped within my brain. I think the fever had me—from the sunlight and the terrors of the wreck. My eyes were blurred to the dazzle of sun and sand. I saw nothing that was about me—none of the

company with me in the flesh. Nay, but I saw a figure going before me swiftly after Gandy and John Corbe—he was young, his beard bristling upon his chin, his head close-cropped; he wore a tattered shirt and tattered breeches of nankeen, belted about his middle. He had a metal cup in his right hand. His feet, I saw, were caked with sand and blood! Now though I followed closely at his heels he gave me no heed, speeding after Gandy. But his feet left no imprint on the sand.

Ere I lost sight of him, we had drawn in under the hull of the argosy, broken on the red fang maybe two hundred years before. So for me, as for the convict of Gandy's tale, the shade seemed to flow out like cool water—green water on yellow sand.

She was high built, going high to a shattered turret—the scroll of beaten metal corroded black and green, and on the bleached timbers of the wreck the drippings from the scroll like streaks of green paint. Exhausted, gasping, we fell upon the sand in the shade, Erskine and Corbe and Rob and I, and lay there, breathless.

Not so Gandy! I heard his body rasping against the ship's side—I heard the crash of rotting wood as if he had forced his way through to the hold. And suddenly the sound of his voice—savage, strident—brought us to our feet, and staggering round under the ship's side.

She was broken amidships—broken on a great blood-red fang of rock; a cavity gaped

in her side—smashed through the matchwood with some bar of iron, I take it, by the fellow who had landed on the isle when he fled from Botany Bay. We saw no sign we of Gandy—only from within the hulk came the mutter of his voice—his laughter, cracked, broken laughter, a madman's laughter.

Now the cavity reached down to the very sand, and easily we clambered through, Erskine and Corbe ahead of Rob and me. And I saw that we were in the ship's hold—that a wide stretch of deck had fallen in, a ruin of broken beams and planking, letting in light for the full space of the hold. Ay, and a great black iron-bound chest with the lid smashed off lay open before us. And a skull was grinning up at us, and nigh it lay the skeleton's bones. Gandy was kneeling by the chest; Gandy was clawing at the treasure in it—his withered white talons clawing as a skeleton's bony hands. Ropes of pearls, in the shade milk-white as the moon, and burning in rose colours when the sunlight coming in by the break in the deck glinted on them. Pearls—a treasure of pearls. Emeralds green as the sea, and having in their green the phosphorescent lights as the lights from the eyes of the cat. A collar of thin gold, crusted with rubies, blood-red rubies, which when Gandy clawed them out splashed from his bone-white hands as blood. Cups of gold, fashioned fantastically—a great cup of wine-red glass set on a stem of gold. He lifted it high in his claw as we watched him. He lifted it high, and the sunlight caught its

stem. And for its setting of gems a jewelled snake of green and blue and rose-coloured fire seemed suddenly to coil about the stem. He lifted it high, as if he would drink from the empty glass. And his voice came strident, shrill.

‘Such a treasure as never all the gentlemen of fortune snatched from the damned Spaniard. Such a treasure as I, Simon Gandy, sought all the days I sailed my ship. Treasure of Ind—lying here for the sands to bury or the thief to paw—he who fled from Botany Bay. He who died in the night in the tavern—for the rosary and the chart!’

I saw the figure in the sunlight then! I saw it poised to spring!

‘And the blood ran over my hands and splashed upon my face. And none heard—none, as I passed down the stair into the street. And none followed. None followed after!—Rosary—and the collar I sold to the Jew—the collar of gold—for I starved—I starved in London. I who had sailed my ship—*The Tortoise*, that I drove to her death upon the rocks. Dutchman’s treasure this—mark you,’ turning suddenly upon us, as if aware of our presence. ‘A man would sell his soul to the Devil, sirs, for a moiety of this. Even as I sold my soul! Even as you sold—John Corbe!’

I heard John Corbe gasp behind me. I saw the figure gliding forward. I would have cried out, but my tongue seemed stuck to my mouth.

‘And I live—and shall live! And the gems

are mine and the gold—and the cup is mine. And I drink—I drink—to the Devil, my master.'

I saw him swing the blazing cup above his head. I saw the flames of its jewels as a coronal of fire. I saw the figure leap.

Suddenly the cup crashed from his hands and smashed in fragments at my feet. I saw him clutch wildly at his throat, reel back, and fall upon the treasure chest—struggling an instant—twitching horribly—froth on his lips. Dead, when we bore him out from the reeking hold into the shade.

NOW it was a December evening more than a year thence ere I came again to Corbe. I sat muffled in greatcoat and shawl, my mother by my side and Rob, clad as I, facing me. Ay, my mother, for the day before in the office of Mr. Garvin, attorney to Mrs. Corbe, John Corbe, my kinsman, had told the story of my spiriting away at his instance, that the Corbe lands might be his. Told it coldly and impatiently, regretting nothing, a handsome figure of a gentleman, modishly clad and curled, though a whit too sun-burned for the fashion. And all the while my mother sat and watched him with pale, contemptuous face, as he told his tale slowly, so that the clerk might write it down; and Mr. Garvin sitting, plump and powdered, regarded him mildly through his spectacles. But no sooner had the gentleman scrawled his signature than the old attorney was on his feet and, banging his fist upon the table with such vehemence that he splashed the ink upon the page, he cried indignantly:

‘John Corbe, I’ve listened to as pretty a confession as ever has been my lot in the

course of my experience. Forty years' experience! Gad, Corbe, I marvel that madam lets you go scot-free. I marvel—I Marvel! Jenkins'—to the clerk—'show Mr. Corbe the door.'

Drawing on his gloves and taking hat and cane, his insolent lips sneering still, John Corbe made my mother a profound bow and passed out without a word. Out to game and wine away the guineas that were his share of the treasure in the hold of the wrecked Dutchman. Out of my life, for I never looked again on John Corbe to the day of his miserable death,—a broken wastrel, diseased, penurious. That had been his condition—he should have his share and should go free and unchallenged; and my mother, though observing that the very bargaining set any doubt for her at rest—that, indeed, she had none, knowing me her son—had promised that there should be no scandal and no prosecution of him, while Erskine had consented contemptuously that a fourth of the gems should be his.

For we had borne away from the wreck the most precious of the gems, when we sailed from the isle. Though I, with the thought of the grim horror I had seen—or did believe that I had seen, whether in fact or fancy—would not enter the hold of the wrecked argosy again, after we bore Gandy forth. And we had buried his body in the sand under the shade that the great ship made—buried him in a shallow grave, and left no cross to show his resting-place—with no prayer for his soul, save

the prayer that silently I offered to Heaven for him, or the prayer that Rob or Erskine might have framed.

Now, if the argosy contained other treasure than the contents of the chest, so was it hid beneath the fallen deck that we could not have laid it bare, nor, indeed, could we have carried it away, so weary were we with our tramping over the sands—so parched with thirst under that burning sun. But we bore away many pearls and emeralds, and the collar of rubies set in gold which had flowed from Gandy's hands like blood.

And on the following morn we sailed again—in better heart, for a shower of rain had fallen in the night, and from the dripping mangroves and the soaking soil we had run several gallons of fresh water into the barrel. So thence for five days we beat along the coast—not landing lest we fall in with savages—and having a sufficiency of food and only the four of us now left aboard. At eve of the fifth day a strong wind drove us from the shore—all night from shore, and though at times we heard the roar of breakers, we drove safely out to sea. And heavy rain falling again we replenished our stock of water.

So for a week thence we floated in our little boat, the sport of the sea. So, we had scarce enough bread and pork to keep the life in us, and but the merest sup of water thrice a day. So, as with Bligh and his hapless company turned adrift from His Majesty's ship *Bounty*, the will of one man bore us with it into safety.

And at last at dawn the sails of the brig *Æolus* of John Company's fleet bound from New South Wales shaped on the distant sea. And ere noon we were aboard with our treasure, safe from all the perils of the sea.

Home to London—a fair voyage—and we as passengers. Grown were Rob and I to tall fellows in those two years since first the *Sea Hawk* had borne us off from Corbe. Aye, and when we sought out Garvin, to whom John Corbe, caring nothing now save for his share of the treasure, directed us, and the attorney had told us that Mistress Anne, believing me dead, and no longer able to endure the loneliness of the Manor was living a secluded life in London; and when we had sought her out, and I had caught her in my arms, her head, grey with long sorrowing, scarce reached my shoulder.

So now we drove to Corbe for Christmas—clad, Rob and I, modishly for the first time in our lives. My mother's purse had tricked us out, though Mr. Garvin, ere we left London, had undertaken the suit against Eggleston and his wife for the recovery of Rob's patrimony. Pounds, he had begged my mother to punish; she, caring only now that I was with her, had conceded only that the attorney might address a letter to the fat scamp, advising him of my return, of John Corbe's confession, and of his liability for complicity in the affair. But no scandal would my mother have for all Mr. Garvin's protests and pleadings.

For Corbe! Old Martha and John yet kept

the Manor in readiness for their mistress, should she ever elect to return from London. And a letter had gone before us telling our coming. And though the snow was thick on the roads, and the flakes crusted upon the carriage glass, the warmth of the great hearth at my home seemed to flow out to me. Erskine would join us for Christmas, having tarried in London only for the disposition of the gems that should restore his fortunes in Virginia. Erskine, who loved my mother—the thought of whom alone vexed me now—lest he should win her—lest he should share with me her love so long withheld from me.

Nigh Corbe! On the ridge above the stone bridge where we had met Sir Martin Ainley on that night of the attack upon the Manor. And where he met us now—overtaking us in his great coach drawn by a spanking pair, his voice roaring out, ‘Pull up! D’ye hear me? Damn you, pull up’—this to our coachman.

Stout and bluff and hearty he greeted us, calling me the devil of a young dog to go sailing overseas—‘Leaving the finest woman in England to cry her pretty eyes out for ye. Why, ye should be horsewhipped’—and laughing his wheezing laugh, and all the while ogling my mother. But for the chill and for the fact that our carriage would scarce bear the weight of him, he returned presently to his own coach, promising, with a gallant bow and a kissing of his fingers at my mother, to follow on after to the Manor.

‘The man,’ says my mother, laughing, as

she drew her cloak about her, ' will be the plague of my life again. Oh, my dear, he wants to marry me—he's pestered me for years. And I'll never marry him—the ridiculous creature—or any one else. My heart's not large enough ever to love more in life than Roger Corbe, your father—or you, my son.'





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